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STORIES OF MYSTERY AND SUSPENSE

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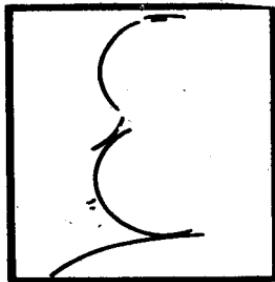


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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Dr. Narendra Choudhry

Mysteries in our real life are sometime more mysterious than the fiction. And mysteries of our 'earth' are even more unbelievable. The earth has been regarded as a 'Living Thing' throughout the human history. But science has lead us to new horizons of knowledge and belief and now the scientists have discovered the 'earth' a living planet. Our planet's physical environment and its inhabitants are so intricately intertwined that they constitute a single entity - a super-organism, which include the atmosphere, the soil, the seas, the plants and the animals we humans are also part of it - and by hurting it we are ultimately hurting ourselves.

About twenty years back James Lovelock, an English scientist, discovered a new way of looking at our world. The classical view of evolution is that organisms adapt by natural selection to whatever conditions the physical environment throws up. The earth is the ship and we, the life forms, are simply passengers along for the ride. According to this view, life forms have no control and are simply at the mercy of the environment.

"Organisms do not just 'adapt' to a dead world determined by physics and chemistry alone. They live with a world that is the breath and bones of their ancestors and that they are now sustaining," says Lovelock. This view holds that life keeps the planet in a state which promotes the continuation and evolution of more life.

Over the past 20 years Lovelock and others have accumulated great deal of evidence in support of this theory. One of the most powerful pieces of evidence is the constant temperature of earth, although the sun's temperature has increased by 25% since life first evolved about three-and-a-half billion years ago, interrupted by only minor fluctuations between ice ages. This global temperature control has been achieved by a gradual decrease in the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, which acted as an insulator. In the dark past when life was first evolving, the atmosphere was predominantly carbon dioxide.

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Out the Window

by Lawrence Block

There was nothing special about her last day. She seemed a little jittery, preoccupied with something or with nothing at all. But this was nothing new for Paula.

She was never much of a waitress in the three months she spent at Armstrong's. She'd forget orders and mix up others, and when you wanted the check or another round of drinks, you could go crazy trying to attract her attention. There were days when she walked through her shift like a ghost through walls, and it was as though she had perfected some arcane technique of astral projection, sending her mind out for a walk while her long lean body went on serving food and drinks and wiping down empty tables.

She did make an effort, though. She tried. She could always manage a smile. Sometimes it was the brave smile of the walking wounded and other times it was a tight-jawed brittle grin with a few tabs of amphetamine behind it, but you take what you can to get through the days and any smile is better than none at all. She knew most of Armstrong's regulars by name and

her greeting always made you feel as though you'd come home. When that's all the home you have, you tend to appreciate that sort of thing.

And if the career wasn't perfect for her, well, it certainly hadn't been what she'd had in mind when she came to New York in the first place. You no more set out to be a waitress in a Ninth Avenue gin mill than you intentionally become an ex-cop coasting through the months on bourbon and coffee. We have that sort of greatness thrust upon us. When you're as young as Paula Wittlauer you hang in there, knowing things are going to get better. When you're my age you just hope they don't get too much worse.

She worked the early shift, noon to eight, Tuesday through Saturday. Trina came on at six so there were two girls on the floor during the dinner rush. At eight Paula would go wherever she went and Trina would keep on bringing cups of coffee and glasses of bourbon for another six hours or so.

Paula's last day was a Thursday in late September. The heat of the summer was starting to

break up. There was a cooling rain that morning and the sun never did show its face. I wandered in around four in the afternoon with a copy of the *Post* and read through it while I had my first drink of the day. At eight o'clock I was talking with a couple of nurses from Roosevelt Hospital who wanted to grouse about a resident surgeon with a Messiah complex. I was making sympathetic noises when Paula swept past our table and told me to have a good evening.

I said, "You too, kid." Did I look up? Did we smile at each other? Hell, I don't remember.

"See you tomorrow, Matt."

"Right," I said. "God willing."

But He evidently wasn't. Around three Justin closed up and I went around the block to my hotel. It didn't take long for the coffee and bourbon to cancel each other out. I got into bed and slept.

My hotel is on 57th Street between Eighth and Ninth. It's on the uptown side of the block, and my window is on the street side looking south. I can see the World Trade Center at the tip of Manhattan from my window.

I can also see Paula's building. It's on the other side of 57th Street a hundred yards or so to the east, a towering highrise that, had it been directly across from me, would have blocked my view of the Trade Center.

She lived on the seventeenth floor. Sometime after four she went out a high window. She swung out past the sidewalk and landed in the street a few feet from the curb, between a couple of parked cars.

In high school physics they teach you that falling bodies accelerate at a speed of thirty-two feet per second per second. So she would have fallen thirty-two feet in the first second, another sixty-four feet the next second, then ninety-six feet in the third. Since she fell something like two hundred feet, I don't suppose she could have spent more than four seconds in the actual act of falling.

I got up around ten thirty. When I stopped at the desk for my mail, Vinnie told me they'd had a jumper across the street during the night. "A dame," he said, which is a word you don't hear much any more. "She went out without a stitch on. You could catch your death that way."

I looked at him.

"Landed in the street, just missed somebody's Caddy. How'd you like to find something like that for a hood ornament? I wonder if your insurance would cover that—what do you call it, act of God?" He came out from behind the desk and walked with me to the door. "Over there," he said, pointing. "Where the florist's

van is is where she flopped. Nothing to see anyway. By the time I came on duty there wasn't a trace left."

"Who was she?"

"Who knows?"

I had things to do that morning, and as I did them I thought from time to time of the jumper. They're not that rare and they usually do the deed in the hours before dawn. They say it's always darkest then.

Sometime in the early afternoon I was passing Armstrong's and stopped in for a short one. I stood at the bar and looked around to say hello to Paula but she wasn't there. A doughy redhead named Rita was taking her shift.

Dean was behind the bar. I asked him where Paula was. "She skipping school today?"

"You didn't hear?"

"Jimmy fired her?"

He shook his head, and before I could venture any further guesses he told me.

I drank my drink. I had an appointment to see somebody about something, but suddenly it ceased to seem important. I put a dime in the phone and cancelled my appointment and came back and had another drink. My hand was trembling slightly when I picked up the glass. It was a little steadier when I set it down.

I crossed Ninth Avenue and sat in St. Paul's for awhile. Ten, twenty minutes, something like that. I lit a candle for Paula and a few other candles for a few other corpses, and I sat and thought about life and death and high windows. Around the time I left the police force I discovered that churches were very good places for thinking about that sort of thing.

After a while I walked over to her building and stood on the pavement in front of it. The florist's truck had moved on, and I examined the street where she'd landed. There was, as Vinnie had assured me, no trace of what had happened. I tilted my head back and looked up, wondering what widow she might have fallen from, then looked down at the pavement and up again, and a sudden rush of vertigo made my head spin. In the course of all this I managed to attract the attention of the building's doorman and he came out to the curb, anxious to talk about the former tenant. He was a black man about my age and he looked as proud of his uniform as the guy in the Marine Corps recruiting poster. It was a goodlooking uniform—shades of brown, epaulets, gleaming brass buttons.

"Terrible thing," he said, "a young girl like that with her whole life ahead of her."

"Did you know her well?"

He shook his head. "She would give me a smile, always say hello, call me by name. Always in a hurry, rushing in, rushing out again. You wouldn't think she had a care in the world. But you never know."

"You never do."

"She lived on the seventeenth floor. I wouldn't live that high above the ground if you gave me the place rent-free."

"Heights bother you?"

I don't know if he heard the question. "I live up one flight of stairs. That's just fine for me. No elevator and no high window." His brow clouded and he looked on the verge of saying something else, but then someone started to enter his lobby and he moved to intercept him. I looked up again, trying to count windows to the seventeenth floor, but the vertigo returned and I gave it up.

"Are you Matthew Scudder?"

I looked up. The girl who'd asked the question was very young, with long straight brown hair and enormous light brown eyes. Her face was open and defenseless, and her lower lip was quivering. I said I was Matthew Scudder and pointed at the chair opposite mine. She remained on her feet.

"I'm Ruth Wittlauer," she said. The name didn't register until

she said, "Paula's sister." Then I nodded and studied her face for signs of a family resemblance. If they were there I couldn't find them. It was ten in the evening, Paula had been dead for eighteen hours, and her sister was standing expectantly before me, her face a curious blend of determination and uncertainty.

I said, "I'm sorry. Won't you sit down? And will you have something to drink?"

"I don't drink."

"Coffee?"

"I've been drinking coffee all day, I'm shaky from all the damn coffee. Do I *have* to order something?"

She was on the edge, all right. I said, "No, of course not." I caught Trina's eye and warned her off and she nodded shortly and let us alone. I sipped my own drink and watched Ruth Wittlauer over the brim of the cup.

"You knew my sister, Mr. Scudder."

"In a superficial way, as a customer knows a waitress."

"The police say she killed herself."

"And you don't think so?"

"I know she didn't."

I watched her eyes while she spoke, and I was willing to believe she meant what she said. She didn't believe that Paula went out the window of her own accord, not for a moment. Of

course that didn't mean she was right.

"What do you think happened?"

"She was murdered. I know she was murdered. I think I know who did it."

"Who?"

"Cary McCloud."

"I don't know him."

"But it may have been somebody else," she went on. She lit a cigarette, smoked for a few moments in silence. "I'm pretty sure it was Cary," she said.

"Why?"

"They were living together." She frowned, as if in recognition of the fact that cohabitation was small evidence of murder. "He could do it," she said carefully. "That's why I think he did. I don't think just anyone could commit murder. In the heat of the moment, sure, I guess people fly off the handle, but to do it deliberately and throw someone out of a, out of a, to just deliberately throw someone out of a—"

I put my hand on top of hers. She had long, small-boned hands, and her skin was cool and dry to the touch.

"What do the police say?"

"They say she killed herself." She drew on the cigarette. "But they didn't know her. If Paula wanted to kill herself she would have taken pills. She liked pills."

"I figured she took ups."

"Ups, tranquilizers, ludes, barbiturates. And she liked grass and she liked to drink." She lowered her eyes. My hand was still on top of hers and she looked at our two hands and I removed mine. "I don't do any of those things. I drink coffee, that's my one vice, and I don't even do that much because it makes me jittery. It's the coffee that's making me nervous tonight. Not—all of this."

"Okay."

"She was twenty-four. I'm twenty. Baby sister—*square* baby sister—except that was always how she *wanted* me to be. She did all those things and at the same time she told me not to do them, that it was a bad scene. I think she kept me straight. I really do. Not so much because of what she was saying as that I looked at the way she was living and what it was doing to her and I didn't want that for myself. I thought it was crazy what she was doing to herself, but at the same time I guess I worshipped her. I loved her. God, I really did—I'm just starting to realize how much. And she's dead and he killed her, I *know* he killed her, I just know it."

I asked her what she wanted me to do.

"You're a detective."

"Not in an official sense. I used to be a cop."

"Could you find out what happened?"

"I don't know."

"I tried talking to the police. It was like talking to the wall. I can't just turn around and do nothing."

"Suppose I look into it and it still looks like suicide?"

"She didn't kill herself."

"Well, suppose I wind up thinking that she did?"

She thought it over. "I still wouldn't have to believe it."

"No," I agreed. "We get to choose what we believe."

"I have some money." She put her purse on the table. "I'm the straight sister. I have an office job, I save money. I have five hundred dollars with me."

"That's too much to carry with you in this neighborhood."

"Is it enough to hire you?"

I didn't want to take her money. She had five hundred dollars and a dead sister, and parting with one wouldn't bring the other back to life. I'd have worked for nothing, but that wouldn't have been good because neither of us would have taken it seriously enough.

And I have rent to pay and two sons to support, and Armstrong's charges for the coffee and the bourbon. I took four fifty-dollar bills from her and told her I'd do my best to earn them.

* * *

After Paula Wittlauer hit the pavement, a black-and-white from the 18th Precinct caught the squeal and took charge of the case. One of the cops in the car was a guy named Guzik. I hadn't known him when I was on the force, but we'd met since then. I didn't like him and I don't think he cared for me either, but he was reasonably honest and had struck me as competent. I got him on the phone the next morning and offered to buy him a lunch.

We met at an Italian place on 56th Street. He had veal and peppers and some red wine. I wasn't hungry, but I made myself eat a small steak.

Between bites of veal he said, "The kid sister, huh? I talked to her. She's so clean and so pretty it could break your heart if you let it. And of course she don't want to believe Sis did the Dutch act. I asked is she Catholic because then there's the religious angle, but that wasn't it. Anyway, your average priest'll stretch a point. They're the best lawyers going, the hell, two thousand years of practice, they oughta be good. I took that attitude myself. I said, 'Look, there's all these pills. Let's say your sister had herself some pills and drank a little wine and smoked a little pot and then she went to the window for some fresh air. So she got a little dizzy

and maybe she blacked out and most likely she never knew what was happening.' Because there's no question of insurance, Matt, so if she wants to think it's an accident I'm not gonna shout suicide in her ear. But that's what it says in the file."

"Did you close it out?"

"Sure. No question."

"She thinks murder."

He nodded. "Tell me something I don't know. She says this McCloud killed Sis. McCloud's the boyfriend. Thing is, he was at an after-hours club at 53rd and Twelfth about the time Sis was going skydiving."

"You confirm that?"

He shrugged. "It ain't airtight. He was in and out of the place, he coulda doubled back and all, but there was the whole business with the door."

"What business?"

"She didn't tell you? Paula Wittlauer's apartment was locked and the chain bolt was on. The super unlocked the door for us, but we had to send him back to the basement for a bolt-cutter so's we could get through the chain bolt. You can only fasten the chain bolt from inside and you can only open the door a few inches with it on, so either Wittlauer launched her own self out the window or she was shoved out by Plastic Man, and then he went and slithered out the door

without unhooking the chain bolt."

"Or the killer never left the apartment."

"Huh?"

"Did you search the apartment after the super came back and cut the chain for you?"

"We looked around, of course. There was an open window and there was a pile of clothes next to it. You know she went out naked, don't you?"

"Uh-huh."

"There was no burly killer crouching in the shrubbery, if that's what you're getting at."

"You checked the place carefully?"

"We did our job."

"Look under the bed?"

"It was a platform bed. No crawl space under it."

"Closets?"

He drank some wine, put the glass down hard, and glared at me. "What the hell are you getting at? Have you got reason to believe there was somebody in the apartment when we went in there?"

"I'm just exploring the possibilities."

"You honestly think somebody's gonna be stupid enough to stay in the apartment after shoving her out of it? She musta been on the street ten minutes before we hit the building. If somebody *did* kill her—which never happened—they could of

been halfway to Texas by the time we hit the door. And don't that make more sense than jumping in the closet and hiding behind the coats?"

"Unless the killer didn't want to pass the doorman."

"So he's still got the whole building to hide in. Just the one man on the front door is the only security the building's got, anyway, and what does he amount to? And suppose he does hide in the apartment and we happen to spot him. Then where is he? With his neck in the noose, that's where he is."

"Except you didn't spot him."

"Because he wasn't there. And when *I* start seeing little men who aren't there is when I put in my papers and quit the department."

There was an unvoiced challenge in his words. I had quit the department, but not because I'd seen little men. One night some years ago I broke up a bar holdup and went into the street after the pair who'd killed the bartender. One of my shots went wide and a little girl died. After that I didn't see little men or hear voices exactly, but I did leave my wife and kids and quit the force and started drinking on a more serious level. But maybe it would have happened that way even if I'd never killed Estrellita Rivera. People go

through changes and life does the damnedest things to us all.

"It was just a thought," I said. "The sister thinks it's murder, so I was looking for a way for her to be right."

"Forget it."

"I suppose. I wonder why she did it."

"Do they even need a reason? I went in the bathroom and she had a medicine cabinet like a drugstore. Ups, downs, sideways. Maybe she was so stoned she thought she could fly. That would explain her being naked. You don't fly with your clothes on. Everybody knows that."

I nodded. "Did they find drugs in her system?"

"Drugs in her—oh, come on, Matt. She came down seventeen flights and she came down fast."

"Under four seconds."

"Huh?"

"Nothing," I said. "No autopsy?"

"Of course not. You've seen jumpers. You were in the department a lot of years, you know what a person looks like after a drop like that. You want to be technical, there coulda been a bullet in her and nobody was gonna go and look for it. Cause of death was falling from a great height. That's what it says and that's what it was, and don't ask me was she stoned or was she pregnant or any of those

questions because who the hell knows?"

"How'd you even know it was her?"

"We got a positive I.D. from the sister."

I shook my head. "I mean how did you know what apartment to go to? She was naked, so she didn't have any identification on her. Did the doorman recognize her?"

"Are you kidding? He wouldn't go close enough to look. He was alongside the building throwing up a few pints of cheap wine. He couldn't have identified his own ass."

"Then how'd you know who she was?"

"The window." I looked at him. "Hers was the only window that was open more than a couple of inches, Matt. Plus her lights were on. That made it easy."

"I didn't think of that."

"Yeah, well, I was there, and we just looked up and there was an open window and a light behind it, and that was the first place we went to. You'da thought of it if you were there."

"I suppose."

He finished his wine. "It was suicide," he said. "You can tell the sister as much."

"I will. Is it okay if I look at the apartment?"

"Wittlauer's apartment? We didn't seal it, if that's what you

mean. You oughta be able to con the super out of a key."

"Ruth Wittlauer gave me a key."

"Then there you go. There's no department seal on the door. You want to look around?"

"So I can tell the sister I was there."

"Yeah. Maybe you'll come across a suicide note. That's what I was looking for. You turn up something like that and it clears up doubts for the friends and relatives. If it was up to me, I'd get a law passed. No suicide without a note."

"Be hard to enforce."

"Simple," he said. "If you don't leave a note, you gotta come back and be alive again." He laughed. "That'd start 'em scribbling away. Count on it."

The doorman was the same man I'd talked to the day before. It never occurred to him to ask me my business. I rode up in the elevator and walked along the corridor to 17-G. The key Ruth Wittlauer had given me opened the door. There was just the one lock. That's the way it usually is in highrises. A doorman, however slipshod he may be, endows tenants with a sense of security. The residents of unserviced walkups affix three or four extra locks to their doors and still cower behind them.

The apartment had an unfin-

sistants. I asked to borrow a screwdriver. He gave me a long one with an amber plastic grip. He didn't ask me who I was or what I wanted it for.

I returned to Paula Wittlauer's apartment and removed the chain bolt from its moorings on the door and jamb. I left the building and walked around the corner to a hardware store on Ninth Avenue. They had a good selection of chain bolts, but I wanted one identical to the one I'd removed and I had to walk down Ninth Avenue as far as 50th Street before I found what I was looking for.

Back in Paula's apartment I mounted the new chain bolt, using the holes in which the original had been mounted. I tightened the screws with the super's screwdriver and stood out in the corridor and played with the chain. My hands are large and not terribly skillful, but even so I was able to lock and unlock the chain bolt from outside the apartment.

"I don't know who put it up, Paula or a previous tenant or someone on the building staff, but that chain bolt had been as much protection as the Sanitized wrapper on a motel toilet seat. As evidence that Paula'd been alone when she went out the window, it wasn't worth a thing.

I replaced the original chain

bolt, put the new one in my pocket, returned to the basement, and gave back the screwdriver. The man I returned it to seemed surprised to get it back.

It took me a couple of hours to find Cary McCloud. I'd learned that he tended bar evenings at a club in the West Village called the Spider's Web. I got down there around five. The guy behind the bar had knobby wrists and an underslung jaw and he wasn't Cary McCloud. "He doesn't come on till eight," he told me, "and he's off tonight anyway." I asked where I could find McCloud. "Sometimes he's here afternoons but he hasn't been in today. As far as where you could look for him, that I couldn't tell you."

A lot of people couldn't tell me, but eventually I ran across someone who could. You can quit the police force but you can't stop looking and sounding like a cop, and while that's a hindrance in some situations it's a help in others. Ultimately I found a man in a bar down the block from the Spider's Web who'd learned it was best to cooperate with the police if it didn't cost you anything. He gave me an address on Barrow Street and told me which bell to ring.

I went to the building but I rang several other bells until

somebody buzzed me through the downstairs door. I didn't want Cary to know he had company coming. I climbed two flights of stairs to the apartment he was supposed to be occupying. The bell downstairs hadn't had his name on it. It hadn't had any name at all.

Loud rock music was coming through his door. I stood in front of it for a minute, then hammered on it loud enough to make myself heard over the electric guitars. After a moment the music dropped in volume. I pounded on the door again and a male voice asked who I was.

I said, "Police. Open up." That's a misdemeanor, but I didn't expect to get in trouble for it.

"What's it about?"

"Open up, McCloud!"

"Oh, God," he said. He sounded tired, aggravated. "How did you find me anyway? Give me a minute, huh? I want to put some clothes on."

Sometimes that's what they say while they're putting a clip into an automatic. Then they pump a handful of shots through the door and into you if you're still standing behind it. But his voice didn't have that kind of edge to it and I couldn't summon up enough anxiety to get out of the way. Instead I put my ear against the door and heard whispering within. I couldn't make out what they were whis-

pering about or get any sense of the person who was with him. The music was down in volume but there was still enough of it to cover their conversation.

The door opened. He was tall and thin, with hollow cheeks and prominent eyebrows and a worn wasted look to him. He must have been in his early thirties and he didn't really look much older than that, but you sensed that in another ten years he'd look twenty years older. If he lived that long. He wore patched jeans and a T-shirt with Spider's Web silkscreened on it. Beneath the legend there was a sketch of a web. A macho spider stood at one end of it, grinning, extending two of his eight arms to welcome a hesitant girlish fly.

He noticed me noticing the shirt and managed a grin. "Place where I work," he said.

"I know."

"So come into my parlor. It's not much but it's home."

I followed him inside and drew the door shut after me. The room was about fifteen feet square and held nothing you could call furniture. There was a mattress on the floor in one corner and a couple of cardboard cartons alongside it. The music was coming from a stereo, turntable and tuner and two speakers all in a row along the far wall. There was a closed door over on

the right. I figured it led to the bathroom, and that there was a woman on the other side of it.

"I guess this is about Paula," he said. I nodded. "I've been over this with you guys," he said. "I was nowhere near there when it happened. The last I saw her was five, six hours before she killed herself. I was working at the Web and she came down and sat at the bar. I gave her a couple of drinks and she split."

"And you went on working."

"Until I closed up. I kicked everybody out a little after three and it was close to four by the time I had the place swept up and the garbage on the street and the window gates locked. Then I came over here and picked up Sunny and we went up to the place on 53rd."

"And you got there when?"

"Hell, I don't know. I wear a watch but I don't look at it every damn minute. I suppose it took five minutes to walk here and then Sunny and I hopped in a cab and we were at Patsy's in ten minutes at the outside. That's the after-hours place. I told you people all of this, I really wish you would talk to each other and leave me the hell alone."

"Why doesn't Sunny come out and tell me about it?" I nodded at the bathroom door. "Maybe she can remember the time a little more clearly."

"Sunny? She stepped out a little while ago."

"She's not in the bathroom?"

"Nope. Nobody's in the bathroom."

"Mind if I see for myself?"

"Not if you can show me a warrant."

We looked at each other. I told him I figured I could take his word for it. He said he could always be trusted to tell the truth. I said I sensed as much about him.

He said, "What's the hassle, huh? I know you guys got forms to fill out, but why not give me a break? She killed herself and I wasn't anywhere near her when it happened."

He could have been. The times were vague, and whoever Sunny turned out to be, the odds were good that she'd have no more time sense than a koala bear. There were any number of ways he could have found a few minutes to go up to 57th Street and heave Paula out a window, but it didn't add up that way and he just didn't feel like the killer to me. I knew what Ruth meant and I agreed with her that he was capable of murder but I didn't think of this particular murder.

I said, "When did you go back to the apartment?"

"Who said I did?"

"You picked up your clothes, Cary."

"That was yesterday afternoon. The hell, I needed my clothes and stuff."

"How long were you living there?"

He hedged. "I wasn't exactly living there."

"Where were you exactly living?"

"I wasn't exactly living anywhere. I kept most of my stuff at Paula's place and I stayed with her most of the time, but it wasn't as serious as actual living together. We were both too loose for anything like that. Anyway, the thing with Paula, it was pretty much winding itself down. She was a little too crazy for me." He smiled with his mouth. "They have to be a little crazy," he said, "but when they're too crazy it gets to be too much of a hassle."

Oh, he could have killed her. He could kill anyone if he had to, if someone was making too much of a hassle. But if he were to kill cleverly, faking the suicide in such an artful fashion, fastening the chain bolt on his way out, he'd pick a time when he had a solid alibi. He was not the sort to be so precise and so slipshod all at the same time.

"So you went and picked up your stuff?"

"Right."

"Including the stereo and records."

"The stereo was mine. The

records, I left the folk music and the classical shit because that belonged to Paula. I just took my records."

"And the stereo."

"Right."

"You got a bill of sale for it, I suppose."

"Who keeps that crap?"

"What if I said Paula kept the bill of sale? What if I said it was in with her papers and cancelled checks?"

"You're fishing."

"You sure of that?"

"Nope. But if you did say that I suppose I'd say the stereo was a gift from her to me. You're not really going to charge me with stealing a stereo, are you?"

"Why should I? Robbing the dead's a sacred tradition. You took the drugs too, didn't you? Her medicine cabinet used to look like a drugstore, but there was nothing stronger than Excedrin when I took a look. That's why Sunny's in the bathroom. If I hit the door all the pretty little pills go down the toilet."

"I guess you can think that if you want."

"And I can come back with a warrant if I want."

"That's the idea."

"I ought to rap on the door just to do you out of the drugs, but it doesn't seem worth the trouble. That's Paula Wittlauer's stereo. I suppose it's worth a couple of hundred dollars. And

you're not her heir. Unplug that thing and wrap it up, McCloud. I'm taking it with me."

"The hell you are."

"The hell I'm not."

"You want to take anything but yourself out of here, you come back with a warrant. Then we'll talk about it."

"I don't need a warrant."

"You can't—"

"I don't need a warrant because I'm not a cop. I'm a detective, McCloud. I'm private, and I'm working for Ruth Wittlauer, and that's who's getting the stereo. I don't know if she wants it or not, but that's her problem. She doesn't want Paula's pills so you can pop them yourself or give them to your girlfriend. But I'm walking out of here with that stereo and I'll walk through you if I have to—and don't think I wouldn't enjoy it."

"You're not even a cop."

"Right."

"You got no authority at all." He spoke in a tone of wonder. "You said you were a cop."

"You can always sue me."

"You can't take that stereo. You can't even be in this room."

"That's right." I was itching for him. I could feel my blood in my veins. "I'm bigger than you," I said, "and I'm a whole lot harder, and I'd get a certain amount of satisfaction in beating the hell out of you. I don't like you. It bothers me that you

didn't kill her because *somebody* did and it would be a pleasure to hang it on you. But you didn't do it. Unplug the stereo and pack it up so I can carry it or I'm going to take you apart."

I meant it and he realized as much. He thought about taking a shot at me and he decided it wasn't worth it. Maybe it wasn't all that much of a stereo. While he was unhooking it, I dumped a carton of his clothes out onto the floor and we packed the stereo in it. On my way out the door he said he could always go to the cops and tell them what I'd done.

"I don't think you want to do that," I said.

"You said somebody killed her."

"That's right."

"You just making noise?"

"No."

"You're serious?" I nodded. "She didn't kill herself? I thought it was open and shut, from what the cops said. It's interesting—in a way, I guess you could say it's a load off my mind."

"How?"

He shrugged. "I thought, you know, maybe she was upset it wasn't working out between us. At the Web the vibes were on the heavy side, if you follow me. Our thing was falling apart and I was seeing Sunny and she was seeing other guys and I thought

maybe that was what did it for her. I suppose I blamed myself."

"I can see it was eating away at you."

"I just said it was on my mind."

I didn't say anything.

"Man," he said, "*nothing* eats away at me. You let things get to you that way and it's death."

I shouldered the carton and headed on down the stairs.

Ruth Wittlauer had supplied me with an Irving Place address and a Gramercy telephone number. I called the number and didn't get an answer, so I walked over to Hudson and caught a northbound cab. There were no messages for me at the hotel desk. I put Paula's stereo in my room, tried Ruth's number again, then walked over to the 18th Precinct. Guzik had gone off duty but the desk man told me to try a restaurant around the corner, and I found him there drinking draft Heineken's with another cop named Birnbaum. I sat at their table and ordered bourbon for myself and another round for the two of them.

I said, "I have a favor to ask. I'd like you to seal Paula Wittlauer's apartment."

"We closed that out," Guzik reminded me.

"I know, and the boyfriend closed out the dead girl's stereo." I told him how I'd reclaimed the

unit from Cary McCloud. "I'm working for Ruth, Paula's sister. The least I can do is make sure she gets what's coming to her. She's not up to cleaning out the apartment now, and it's rented through the first of October. McCloud's got a key and God knows how many other people have keys. If you slap a seal on the door, it'd keep the grave robbers away."

"I guess we can do that. Tomorrow all right?"

"Tonight would be better."

"What's there to steal? You got the stereo out of there and I didn't see anything else around that was worth much."

"Things have a sentimental value."

He eyed me and frowned. "I'll make a phone call," he said. He went to the booth in the back and I jawed with Birnbaum until he came back and told me it was taken care of.

I said, "Another thing I was wondering. You must have had a photographer on the scene."

"Sure. That's routine."

"Did he go up to the apartment while he was at it? Take a roll of interior shots?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"I thought maybe I could have a look at them."

"What for?"

"You never know. The reason I knew it was Paula's stereo in McCloud's apartment was I could

see the pattern in the dust on top of the dresser where it had been. If you've got interior pictures, maybe I'll see something else that's not there any more and I can lean on McCloud a little and recover it for my client."

"And that's why you'd like to see the pictures."

"Right."

He gave me a look. "That door was bolted from the inside, Matt. With a chain bolt."

"I know."

"And there was no one in the apartment when we went in there."

"I know that too."

"Matt, the case is closed and the reason it's closed is the dizzy broad killed herself. What are you making waves for?"

"I'm not. I just want to see the pictures." I drank what remained of my drink. "You need a new hat anyway, Guzik. The weather's turning and a fellow like you needs a hat for fall."

"If I had the price of a hat, maybe I'd go out and get one."

"You got it," I said.

He nodded and we told Birnbaum we wouldn't be long. I walked with Guzik around the corner to the 18th. On the way I palmed him two tens and a five, the price of a hat in police parlance. He made the bills disappear.

I waited at his desk while he pulled the Paula Wittlauer file.

There were about a dozen black and white prints, eight by ten high-contrast glossies. Perhaps half of them showed Paula's corpse from various angles. I had no interest in these, but I made myself look at them as a sort of reinforcement, so I wouldn't forget what I was doing on the case.

The other pictures were interior shots of the L-shaped apartment. I noted the wide-open window, the dresser with the stereo sitting on it, the chair with her clothing piled haphazardly upon it. I separated the interior pictures from the ones showing the corpse and told Guzik I wanted to keep them for the time being. He didn't mind.

He cocked his head and looked at me. "You got something?"

"Nothing worth talking about."

"If you ever do, I'll want to hear about it."

"Sure."

"You like the life you're leading? Working private, scuffling around?"

"It seems to suit me."

He thought it over, nodded. Then he started for the stairs and I followed after him.

Later that evening I managed to reach Ruth Wittlauer. I bundled the stereo into a cab and took it to her place. She lived in a well kept brownstone a block

and a half from Gramercy Park. Her apartment was inexpensively furnished, but the pieces looked as if they'd been chosen with care. The place was clean and neat. Her clock radio was tuned to an FM station that was playing chamber music. She had coffee made and I accepted a cup and sipped it while I told her about recovering the stereo from Cary McCloud.

"I wasn't sure whether you could use it," I said, "but I couldn't see any reason why he should keep it. You can always sell it."

"No, I'll keep it. I just have a twenty-dollar record player that I bought on 14th Street. Paula's stereo cost a couple of hundred dollars." She managed a smile. "So you've already more than earned what I gave you. Did he kill her?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

I nodded. "He'd kill if he had a reason, but I don't think he did. And if he did kill her he'd never have taken the stereo or the drugs, and he wouldn't have acted the way he did. There was never a moment when I had the feeling he'd killed her."

"And you're sure my sister killed herself?"

"No. I'm pretty sure someone gave her a hand."

Her eyes widened.

I said, "It's mostly intuition.

But there are a few facts to support it." I told her about the chain bolt, how it had proved to the police that Paula'd killed herself but how my experiment had shown it could have been fastened from the corridor.

Then I showed her the pictures I'd obtained from Guzik. I selected one shot which showed the chair with Paula's clothing without showing too much of the window. "The chair," I said, pointing at it. "I wanted to see a photograph taken at the time to make sure things hadn't been rearranged by the cops or McCloud or somebody else. But that clothing's exactly the way it was when I saw it."

"I don't understand."

"The supposition is that Paula got undressed, put her clothes on the chair, then went to the window and jumped." Her lip was trembling but she was holding herself together and I went on talking. "Or she'd taken her clothes off earlier and maybe she took a shower or a nap and then came back and jumped. But look at the chair. She didn't fold her clothes neatly, she didn't put them away—and she didn't just drop them on the floor either. I'm no authority on the way women get undressed, but I don't think many people do it that way."

Ruth nodded. Her face was thoughtful.

"That wouldn't mean very much by itself. If she were upset or stoned or confused, she might have thrown things on the chair as she took them off. But that's not what happened. The order is all wrong. The bra's underneath the blouse, the pantyhose are underneath the skirt. She took her bra off after she took her blouse off, obviously, so it should have wound up on top of the blouse, not under it."

"Of course."

I held up a hand. "It's nothing like proof, Ruth. There are any number of explanations. Maybe she knocked the stuff onto the floor and then picked it up and the order of the garments got switched around. Maybe one of the cops went through the clothing before the photographer came in with his camera."

"But you think she was murdered."

"Yes, I guess I do."

"What are you going to do now?"

"I think I'll poke around a little. I don't know much about Paula's life. I'll have to learn more if I'm going to find out who killed her. But it's up to you to decide whether you want me to stay with it."

"Of course I do. Why wouldn't I?"

"Because it probably won't lead anywhere. Suppose she was upset after her conversation with

McCloud and she picked up a stranger and took him home with her and he killed her. If that's the case, we'll never know who he was."

"It'll take you some time. I suppose you'll want more money." Her gaze was very direct. "I gave you two hundred dollars. I have three hundred more I can afford to pay. When the three hundred runs out, you can tell me if you think it's worth staying with the case. I couldn't afford any more cash right away, but I could arrange to pay you later on or something like that."

I shook my head. "It won't come to more than that," I said, "no matter how much time I spend on it. And you keep the three hundred for the time being, all right? I'll take it from you later on if I need it, and if I feel I've earned it."

"That doesn't seem right."

"It seems right to me," I said. "And don't make the mistake of thinking I'm being charitable."

"But your time's valuable."

I shook my head. "Not to me it isn't."

I spent the next five days picking the scabs off Paula Wittlauer's life. It kept turning out to be a waste of time, but the time's always gone before you realize you've wasted it. And I'd been telling the truth when I

said my time wasn't valuable. I had nothing better to do, and my peeks into the corners of Paula's world kept me busy.

Her life involved more than a saloon on Ninth Avenue and an apartment on 57th Street, more than serving drinks and sharing a bed with Cary McCloud. She did other things. She went one evening a week to group therapy on West 79th Street. She took voice lessons every Tuesday morning on Amsterdam Avenue. She had an ex-boyfriend she saw once in awhile. She hung out in a couple of bars in the neighborhood and a couple of others in the Village. She did this, she did that, she went here, she went there, and I kept busy dragging myself around town and talking to all sorts of people, and managed to learn quite a bit about the person she'd been and the life she'd led without learning anything at all about the person who'd put her on the pavement.

At the same time, I tried to track her movements on the final night of her life. She'd evidently gone more or less directly to the Spider's Web after finishing her shift at Armstrong's. Maybe she'd stopped at her apartment for a shower and a change of clothes, but without further ado she'd headed downtown. Somewhere around ten she left the Web, and I traced

her from there to a couple of other Village bars. She hadn't stayed at either of them long, taking a quick drink or two and moving on. She'd left alone as far as anyone seemed to remember. This didn't prove a thing because she could have stopped elsewhere before continuing uptown, or she could have picked someone up on the street, which I'd learned was something she'd done more than once in her young life. She could have found her killer loitering on a street corner or she could have phoned him and arranged to meet him at her apartment.

Her apartment. The doorman changed off at midnight, but it was impossible to determine whether she'd returned before or after the changing of the guard. She'd lived there, she was a regular tenant, and when she entered or left the building it was not a noteworthy occasion. It was something she did every night, so when she came home for the final time the man at the door had no reason to know it was the final time and thus no reason to take note.

Had she come in alone or with a companion? No one could say, which did suggest that she'd come in alone—if she'd been with someone her entrance would have been a shade more memorable. But this also proved nothing, because I stood on the

other side of 57th Street one night and watched the doorway of her building, and the doorman didn't take the pride in his position that the afternoon doorman had shown. He was away from the door almost as often as he was on it. She could have walked in flanked by six Turkish sailors and there was a chance no one would have seen her.

The doorman who'd been on duty when she went out the window was a rheumy-eyed Irishman with liver-spotted hands. He hadn't actually seen her land. He'd been in the lobby, keeping himself out of the wind, and then he came rushing out when he heard the impact of the body on the street.

He couldn't get over the sound she made.

"All of a sudden there was this noise," he said. "Just out of the blue there was this noise and it must be it's my imagination but I swear I felt it in my feet. I swear she shook the earth. I had no idea what it was, and then I came rushing out and Jesus God there she was."

"Didn't you hear a scream?"

"The street was empty just then. This side, anyway. There was nobody around to scream."

"Didn't *she* scream, on the way down?"

"Did somebody say she screamed? I never heard it."

Do people scream as they fall? They generally do in films and on television. During my days on the force I saw several of them after they jumped, but by the time I got to them there were no screams echoing in the air. And a few times I'd been on hand while they talked someone in off a ledge, but in each instance the talking was successful and I didn't have to watch a falling body accelerate according to the immutable laws of physics.

Could you get much of a scream out in four seconds?

I stood in the street where she'd fallen and I looked up toward her window. I counted off four seconds in my mind. A voice shrieked in my brain. It was Thursday night—actually, Friday morning. One o'clock—time I got myself around the corner to Armstrong's, because in another couple of hours Justin would be closing for the night and I'd want to be drunk enough to sleep.

And an hour or so after that, she'd be one week dead.

I'd worked myself into a reasonably bleak mood by the time I got to Armstrong's. I skipped the coffee and crawled straight into the bourbon bottle, and before long it began to do what it was supposed to do. It blurred the edges of thought so I couldn't

see the bad dark things that lurked there.

When Trina finished for the night, she joined me and I bought her a couple of drinks. I don't remember what we talked about. Some but by no means all of our conversation touched upon Paula Wittlauer. Trina hadn't known Paula terribly well—their contact had been largely limited to the two hours a day when their shifts overlapped—but she knew a little about the sort of life Paula had been leading. There had been a year or two when her own life had not been terribly different from Paula's. Now she had things more or less under control, and maybe there would have come a time when Paula would have taken charge of her life, but that was something we'd never know.

I suppose it was close to three when I walked Trina home. Our conversation had turned thoughtful and reflective. On the street she said it was a lousy night for being alone. I thought of high windows and evil things on the edge of thought and took her hand in mine.

She lives on 56th between Ninth and Tenth. While we waited for the light to change at 57th Street I looked over at Paula's building. We were far enough away to look at the high floors. Only a couple of windows were lighted.

That was when I got it.

I've never understood how people think of things, how little perceptions trigger greater insights. But I had it now, something clicked within me and a source of tension unwound itself.

I said something to that effect to Trina.

"You know who killed her?"

"Not exactly," I said. "But I know how to find out. And it can wait until tomorrow."

The light changed and we crossed the street.

She was still sleeping when I left. I got out of bed and dressed in silence, then let myself out of her apartment. I had some coffee and a toasted English muffin at the Red Flame. Then I went across the street to Paula's building. I started on the tenth floor and worked my way up, checking the three or four possible apartments on each floor. A lot of people weren't home. I worked my way clear to the top floor, the twenty-fourth, and by the time I was done I had three possibles listed in my notebook and a list of over a dozen apartments I'd have to check that evening.

At eight thirty that night I rang the bell of Apartment 21-G. It was directly in line with Paula's apartment and four flights above it. The man who

answered the bell wore a pair of Lee corduroy slacks and a shirt with a blue vertical stripe on a white background. His socks were dark blue and he wasn't wearing shoes.

I said, "I want to talk with you about Paula Wittlauer."

His face fell apart and I forgot my three possibles forever because he was the man I wanted. He just stood there. I pushed the door open and stepped forward and he moved back automatically to make room for me. I drew the door shut after me and walked around him, crossing the room to the window. There wasn't a speck of dust or soot on the sill. It was immaculate, as well scrubbed as Lady Macbeth's hands.

I turned to him. His name was Lane Posmantur and I suppose he was around forty, thickening at the waist, his dark hair starting to go thin on top. His glasses were thick and it was hard to read his eyes through them but it didn't matter, I didn't need to see his eyes.

"She went out this window," I said. "Didn't she?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Do you want to know what triggered it for me, Mr. Posmantur? I was thinking of all the things nobody noticed. No one saw her enter the building. Neither doorman remembered it

because it wasn't something they'd be likely to remember. Nobody saw her go out the window. The cops had to look for an open window in order to know who the hell she was. They backtracked her from the window she fell out of.

"And nobody saw the killer leave the building. Now that's the one thing that would have been noticed. It wasn't that significant by itself, but it made me dig a little deeper. It occurred to me that maybe the killer was still inside the building, and then I got the idea that she was killed by someone who *lived* in the building. From that point on, it was just a question of finding you."

I told him about the clothes on the chair. "She didn't take them off and pile them up like that. Her killer put her clothes like that, and he dumped them on the chair so that it would look as though she undressed in her apartment, and so that it would be assumed she'd gone out of her own window.

"But she went out of your window, didn't she?"

He looked at me. After a moment, he said he thought he'd better sit down. He went over to an armchair and sat in it.

I said, "She came here. I guess she took off her clothes and you went to bed with her. Is that right?"

He hesitated, then nodded.

"What made you decide to kill her?"

"I didn't."

I looked at him. He looked away, met my gaze, then avoided my eyes again. "Tell me about it," I suggested. He looked away again and a minute went by before he started to talk.

It was about what I'd figured. She was living with Cary McCloud, but she and Lane Posmantur would get together now and then. He was a lab technician at Roosevelt and he brought home drugs from time to time and perhaps that was part of their attraction. She'd turned up that night a little after two and they went to bed. She was really flying, he said, and he'd been taking pills himself, it was something he'd begun doing lately, maybe seeing her had something to do with it.

They went to bed and did the dirty deed, and then maybe they slept for an hour, something like that, and then she was awake and coming unglued, getting really hysterical, and he tried to settle her down and he gave her a couple of slaps to bring her around, except they didn't bring her around, and she was staggering. She tripped over the coffee table and fell funny, and by the time he sorted himself out and went to her she was lying with her head at a crazy angle

and he knew her neck was broken and when he tried for a pulse there was no pulse.

"All I could think was that she was dead in my apartment and full of drugs and I was in trouble."

"So you put her out the window."

"I was going to take her back to her own apartment. I started to dress her, but it was impossible. And even with her clothes on, I couldn't risk running into somebody in the hallway or on the elevator. It was crazy.

"I left her here and went to her apartment. I thought maybe Cary would help me. I rang the bell but nobody answered. I used her key but the chain bolt was on. Then I remembered she used to fasten it from outside. She'd showed me how she could do it. I unhooked her bolt and went inside.

"Then I got the idea. I went back to my apartment and got her clothes and rushed back and put them on her chair. I opened her window wide. On my way out the door I put her lights on and hooked the chain bolt again.

"I came back here and took her pulse again—she was dead, she hadn't moved or anything. I—I turned off the lights and opened the window. I dragged her over to it, and, oh, God in heaven, God, I almost couldn't do it, but it was an accident that

she was dead and I was so damned *afraid*—”

“And you dropped her out and closed the window.”

He nodded.

“And if her neck was broken it was something that happened in the fall. And whatever drugs were in her system was just something she’d taken by herself, and they’ll never do an autopsy anyway. You were home free.”

“I didn’t hurt her,” he said. “I was just protecting myself.”

“Do you really believe that, Lane?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re not a doctor. Maybe she was dead when you threw her out the window. Maybe she wasn’t.”

“There was no pulse!”

“You couldn’t find a pulse. That doesn’t mean there wasn’t any. Did you try artificial respiration? Do you know if there was any brain activity? Of course not. All you know was that you looked for a pulse and you couldn’t find one.”

“Her neck was broken.”

“Maybe. How many broken necks have you diagnosed? And people sometimes break their necks and live. The point is that you couldn’t have known she was dead and you were too worried about your own skin to do what you should have done. You should have phoned for an am-

bulance. You know that’s what you should have done and you knew it at the time, but you wanted to stay out of it. I’ve known junkies who left their buddies to die of overdoses because they didn’t want to get involved. You went them one better. You put her out a window and let her fall twenty-one stories so that you wouldn’t get involved, and for all you know she was alive when you let go of her.”

“No,” he said. “No! She was dead.”

I’d told Ruth Wittlauer she could wind up believing whatever she wanted. People believe what they want to believe. It was just as true for Lane Posmantur.

“Maybe she was dead,” I said. “If she was dead, that could have been your fault too.”

“What do you mean?”

“You said you slapped her to bring her around. What kind of a slap?”

“I just tapped her on the face.”

“Just a brisk slap to straighten her out.”

“That’s right.”

“Oh, hell, Lane. Who knows how hard you hit her? Who knows whether or not you gave her a shove? She wasn’t the only one on pills. You said she was flying. Well, I think maybe you were doing a little flying yourself. And you’d been sleepy and

you were groggy and she was buzzing around the room and being a general pain in the ass, so you gave her a slap and a shove and another slap and another shove and—”

“No!”

“And she fell down.”

“It was an accident.”

“It always is.”

“I didn’t hurt her. I liked her. She was a good kid, we got on fine. I—”

“Put your shoes on, Lane.”

“What for?”

“I’m taking you to the police station. It’s only a few blocks from here.”

“Am I under arrest?”

“I’m not a policeman.” I’d never gotten around to saying who I was and he’d never thought to ask. “My name’s Scudder, I’m working for Paula’s sister. I suppose you’re under citizen’s arrest. I want you to come to the precinct house with me. There’s a cop named Guzik there and you can talk to him.”

“I don’t have to say anything,” he said. He thought for a moment. “You’re not a cop.”

“No.”

“What I said to you doesn’t mean a thing.” He took a breath, straightened up a little in his chair. “You can’t prove a thing.”

“Maybe I can and maybe I can’t. You probably left prints in Paula’s apartment. I don’t know if Paula left any prints

here or not. You probably scrubbed them up. But there may be neighbors who know you were sleeping with her, and someone may have noticed you scampering back and forth between the apartments that night. It’s even possible a neighbor heard the two of you struggling in here before she went out the window. When the cops know what to look for, they usually find it sooner or later. It’s knowing what you’re after that’s the hard part.

“But that’s not even the point. Put your shoes on, Lane. That’s right. Now we’re going to go see Guzik, that’s his name, and he’s going to advise you of your rights. He’ll tell you that you have the right to remain silent, and that’s the truth, that’s a right you have. And if you remain silent and you get a decent lawyer and do what he tells you, I think you can beat this charge, I really do.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Why?” I was starting to feel drained, but I kept on with it. “Because the worst thing you could do is remain silent, Lane—believe me, that’s the worst thing you could do. If you’re smart, you’ll tell Guzik everything you remember. You’ll make a complete voluntary statement and you’ll read it over when they type it up and you’ll sign your name on the bottom.

"Because you're not really a killer. It doesn't come easily to you. If Cary McCloud had killed Paula, he'd never lose a night's sleep over it. But you're not a psychopath. You were drugged and half crazy and terrified and you did something wrong and it's eating you up. Your face fell apart the minute I walked in here tonight. You could play it cute and beat this charge, but

all you'd wind up doing is beating yourself.

"Because you live on a high floor, Lane. The ground's only four seconds away. If you squirm off the hook, you'll never get it out of your head, you'll never be able to mark it Paid in Full, and one day or night you'll open the window and you'll go out of it."

"No!"

I took his arm. "Come on," I said. "We'll go see Guzik.

A CHALLENGE

HITCHCOCK will welcome contributions from Indian writers of mystery, detection, crime and suspense. It is our cherished goal to enthuse the Indian writer to come up and accept this as a challenge. Selected works will be suitably rewarded. These may also be accepted for publication by our associates in U.S.A.

Only one side clear typed manuscripts will be considered. Unsolicited manuscripts will be returned only when they accompany a self addressed stamped envelop.

The Editor

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SOLUTION TO THE**"UNSOLVED":**

1. Yes.
2. Yes, judging by the patio equipment.
3. Yes, because there are just two settings and two chairs.
4. Yes. Judging by the pattern of shards, the plate was thrown at the chair.
5. At the TV.
6. No. They sat almost back to back and far from each other until she went to the grill, and he had his own portable TV which he'd been looking at. They seemed to have nothing in common except the need to eat.
7. Hers.
8. Yes, because her glass stands next to the steak and her fingerprints are on the carving knife.
9. No. The position of her thumbprint and fingerprints indicates that she was carving with the knife, which requires a sawing stroke, rather than grip-

ping it for the downward motion of stabbing.

10. The Beans had an argument and she lost her temper, threw a plate at him, and then ran off in a huff. That much of Arnold Bean's story is true. But after his wife left, Bean decided to accuse her of trying to stab him. He tore his shirt at the shoulder and called the police, hoping all this would stand him in good stead when the inevitable divorce suit was filed.

Lily should exonerate Mrs. Bean and accuse Bean of falsely charging a crime.

However, aware that Arnold Bean was politically influential, she did nothing. As a result, within a month she was promoted to detective, first grade, where she used her talents to the full.

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The Last Becak

by Gary Alexander

I am a travel writer. I visit interesting places and write about what I experience. The pieces are published in the newspaper that employs me. Sometimes they are syndicated, and when they are, everybody makes a little more money.

The following story will not be syndicated. It can't be because it won't be published. Travel articles are meant to enlighten and entertain the prospective traveler and the casual reader. They are not meant to describe murder and correlated crimes.

People expect me to steer them to where the sun is hot and to where the snow is powdery. They expect me to tell them where to get the best pizza and where not to be cheated on souvenirs. No exposition on clotting puddles of blood, thank you.

But read on and that's what you're gonna get.

My assignment was Indonesia. Ten days max, my editor said. Pick your spot.

How do you pick a spot? Indonesia is the fifth most populous country in the world, a thirteen thousand six hundred seventy-seven island archipelago that stretches farther than from Seattle to Miami. It's like asking an Indonesian journalist to come to the States for a week and a half and Pick A Spot. Disney World? NYC? The Grand Canyon?

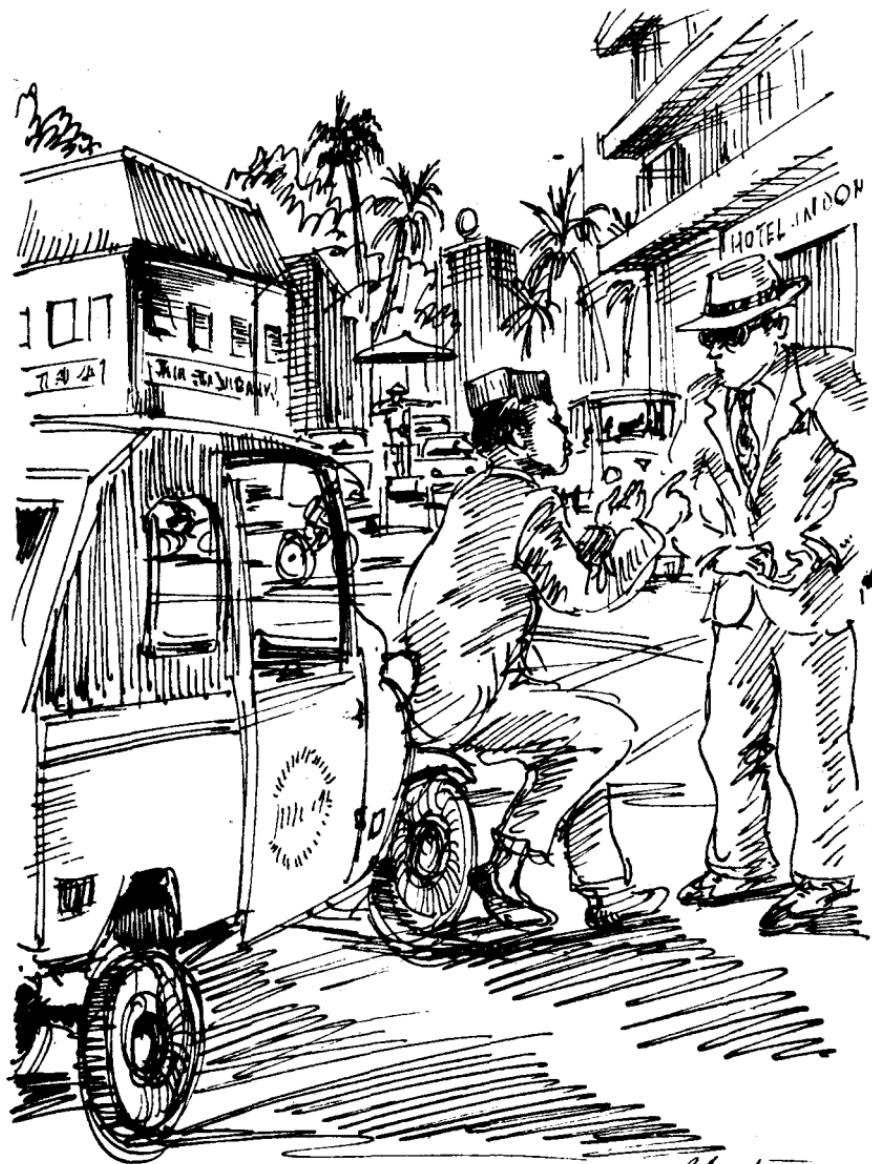
What I didn't pick is Bali. Everybody who does Indonesia does Bali. Colorful culture, sandy beaches, et cetera. They take their notes, shoot their films, and go home, figuring that there's no such thing as too much of a good thing.

Maybe that's what I should have done.

But I didn't.

I picked Jakarta, the capital. I get that syndication stroke now and then because I scout out the unusual, the exotic, the obscure.

If you can call a city of eight or nine or ten million obscure. Nobody knows the exact population. Leave the modern downtown core of vertical glass and steel glitz and Jakarta is a mazelike sprawl of neighborhoods and villages. It's flat, hot, and growing like crabgrass. The Los Angeles of Asia.



IT WAS TIME TO VENTURE OFF THE BEATEN TRACK, WHICH REQUIRED THE SERVICES OF A BECAK.

ALFRED HITCHCOCK
mystery magazine March 1991

By the fourth day I had seen the obligatory tourist attractions. I had visited Old Batavia, bailiwick of the early Dutch colonials. I had duly observed the massive monuments erected at crippling expense by Sukarno in the 1960's. I had seen the waterfront. I had seen the spectacular Istiqlal mosque, Southeast Asia's largest. I had perused any number of markets, museums, and exhibits. I had toured batik and rattan factories. Interesting, yes. But enough already.

It was time to venture off the beaten track.

Which, of course, required the services of a becak.

The Hotel Indonesia was located on Jalan Thamrin, a manic ten-lane throughway that was Jakarta's main drag. The hotel was partially responsible for my off-the-beaten-track itch.

Remember *The Year of Living Dangerously*, the Mel Gibson-Sigourney Weaver movie set in 1965 at the time of the attempted communist coup? Living dangerously was putting it mildly, and the journalists covering the event hung out at the hotel.

I'd like to be able to report that I could still smell the intrigue. But that would be a lie. It seemed to have become a quiet venue for visiting delegates attending various conferences and seminars. In other words, bureaucrats. Boring.

Which brings me to the becak. More or less pronounced *bet-jak*, it is a three-wheeled pedicab. The driver sits above and behind his passenger, who sits in a padded seat under an awning. Once there were in excess of a hundred thousand Jakartan becaks. Now the number is below twenty thousand and dropping rapidly.

The becak was vanishing by government decree. It created a bad image for a modern and metropolitan international city. It was a backward, inhumane eyesore. It was a vestige of colonialism, the native wracking his body to tote his better. It was a nuisance.

All true. No argument. But the becak was also the conveyance of the poor who could not afford a taxi or even a bus. The becak was integral to mainstream Jakarta.

Long banned in the city center, the becak was being scooped up in a widening radius by government trucks, like so much garbage. They were dumped into Jakarta Bay, where they served as a fish reef. Total eradication was the goal.

So I couldn't just step out of the Hotel Indonesia at high noon and hail a becak.

But there was a way.

Jakarta was a restless and vibrant twenty-four hour per day city of night owls and early birds. People were up late or early, visiting, doing things, ducking the ferocious midday sun. The government trucks, however, did not patrol at night. Becaks could ply their trade close to the affluent core and fade into the back roads and alleys when the sun and the trucks appeared.

I walked into the pre-dawn. Four blocks from the hotel, on a secondary street of small shops, I found my becak driver.

He was short, leathery, and smiling. His name was Malik. Through a combination of gestures, handbook Indonesian, and a smattering of English and Dutch and generic pidgin we managed an agreement. For a price he would be my transportation and my teacher.

At the outset, before the trouble, it was a mutually satisfactory arrangement. He was grateful to have an exclusive passenger who was paying him relatively well, I to have an insider as a guide.

We toured the neighborhoods, which were actually a patchwork of self-contained villages known as kampungs. Over the years, people had migrated from the countryside, essentially bringing their kampungs with them. They ranged from modest middle class to squalid, but were generally quite tidy, considering the numbers of residents shoehorned into them. Kampung streets were often little more than footpaths, barely wide enough for a becak. Canals built by Dutch colonials homesick for Amsterdam provided another means of kampung transportation. I won't tell you how the canal water had taken on the color and aroma it had. The common denominator, though, was the people. They were almost without exception friendly and sincere.

I asked Malik about the government crackdown on becaks. He shrugged and said what else could he do? I said I'd read that the government was retraining drivers to be shoemakers and blacksmiths and vegetable vendors and so forth. He laughed and said that he was fifty-three years old, and that the average life expectancy of an Indonesian male was fifty-one. Let them make cobblers and peddlers out of the young, he said; I've been statistically dead for two years. And besides, Malik added, he ate and slept in his becak. What would he do for a home? He came from a rural village, but hadn't been back there for years.

I told Malik he was lucky they hadn't already confiscated his becak. His smile widened into a grin as he pointed out a rust spot

on the otherwise immaculate framework. They *had* grabbed his becak. He had paid a fisherman to locate, hook, and reel it in.

Malik and I parted at noontime, when the blistering sun was straight up. When we rendezvoused in the wee hours of the next morning, he was on foot and he wasn't smiling. He said we couldn't do anything together today. I insisted on knowing why. He insisted that I didn't want to know. I insisted that I did. This went on until I finally out-insisted him.

Malik sighed in defeat and led me into a kampung half a kilometer away. The homes were rather substantial—cement and wooden frame. We weren't alone, but we weren't members of the proverbial sardine can, either. Early risers and insomniacs were about. Shopkeepers were setting up their stalls. Malik was visibly nervous at the increasing humanity and walked so fast I had to jog to keep pace.

He stopped at a space between a shop that sold car bumpers and a stucco-walled home and gestured into the void. I hesitated. Malik considerately handed me a book of matches. I ventured into the darkness with a stride too short and jerky to be termed intrepid.

I lit a match. Seated in Malik's becak was a Chinese gentleman right out of Somerset Maugham's *Asia*. White linen suit, panama hat, sandals. He was dead. Buried nearly to the hilt in his chest was a kris, a centuries-old much-prized Indonesian antique, a dagger as beautiful as it was lethal. The ritzy shops on and in the vicinity of Jalan Thamrin offered the kris at breathtaking prices. The handle, hilt, and what I could see of the blade were gold-inlaid. It could be priceless.

Who is he? I asked hoarsely.

I honestly do not know, I just found him there, Malik said.

Recall the earlier reference to "clotting puddles of blood"? Suffice it to say that my traction as I backed out of the cubbyhole was less than firm. I said *police* to Malik in seven languages. He shook his head, an emphatic *no* in any tongue.

Why no police? I asked as Malik clamped an iron grip on my wrist and towed me away.

A dead body is in my becak, he said. What are the police to think? Who would be their first suspect?

Good point. Not to mention that my proximity to Malik qualified me as an accomplice. My readership had no interest in accommodations offered by the Jakarta jail.

Come on, I said, let's go for a walk. I'll buy breakfast.

No, we have to go back, Malik said suddenly, snapping his fingers, reversing our direction, we have to get the body out of my becak; the police will find him and trace the number on the becak to me.

We? Uh, wait a minute, it's still circumstantial.

The gloom on Malik's face told me he was hiding something. What? I demanded, digging in my heels to halt us.

His name is Mr. Lee, Malik admitted.

Mr. Lee, I thought cynically, a Chinese John Smith. Who exactly is—was Mr. Lee, please?

A sometimes regular nocturnal customer, Malik told me. You, sir, are not my only regular, I must confess. Mr. Lee is in town a week, two weeks, is gone a month, two months, and the cycle repeats.

Where do you drive him? I asked.

Different places and same places, he said.

Swell, I said. He was a thief, a smuggler of krises?

No, no, Malik swore; I never saw him carry a thing.

I accepted his word for the moment. I had little choice. We returned to the murder scene. The becak was there. Mr. Lee was not. I looked around. It was daylight now, but there were fewer people in the vicinity than there had been when we discovered the corpse, and those who remained refused eye contact. Selective myopia, a universal affliction in such situations.

Malik retrieved his becak. There wasn't a spot of blood on the vehicle. I sat in it. Where to? he asked. Elsewhere, I said, anywhere but here.

Malik began pedaling. I felt a lump. I reached in the crack between the seat and seat back and pulled out a ring. It had a heavy gold setting. Small diamonds surrounded a large translucent green stone.

I asked Malik to stop. I got up and showed him the ring. His mouth fell open.

Do you know a jeweler you can trust? I asked.

I know everyone, he replied.

Malik took me deep into yet another kampung. Its market was as pungent and cacophonous as any Middle East bazaar. Our destination jewelry shop sold primarily baubles and imported knock-offs, cheap Rolex imitations and the like. but Malik and the jeweler

were well acquainted. After a whispered conference, the shopkeeper invited us behind a curtain, into the rear of the shop.

We shared tea and cordialities. Then the jeweler examined the ring. Real gold in the setting, he said. Real diamonds too, perhaps two carats total weight.

And the green stone?

He shrugged. He could only guess. Burmese jadeite, he thought. The finest jade in the world. Jadeite was not found on the island of Java. It was a gemstone seldom seen in Jakarta. He wouldn't know jade from a piece of glass.

Value, please?

He shrugged again and said maybe one hundred million rupiah. Quick mental arithmetic converted the rupiah to Yankee dollars: over fifty thousand of them.

The jeweler asked if we wished to sell the ring.

I said it was not mine to sell.

No matter, he said; I could not afford to buy.

I paid him a small appraisal fee and we left.

What next? Malik asked.

Good question, I said, answering his with mine: What "same places" did you drive Mr. Lee?

Actually just one same place, Malik said.

Will you show me?

After a pause, Malik said yes. But not now.

When?

Tonight. Midnight. When the night sky is as dark as it can be.

So why am I doing this? I asked myself as I yawned and climbed into Malik's becak. The truth, I replied. Truth and justice.

Well, sure, yeah, that's part of it. But another factor is that we've been hanging on to (and have been seen hanging on to!) a valuable piece of probable contraband that is evidence in a crime we can't prove took place.

In other words, I'm up to my you-know-what in alligators. I've got nothing to lose by lowering my head, plunging forward, and playing detective. I figure we'll get to the bottom of the mess, then I'll put the ring and an anonymous note into an envelope and drop it in a mailbox at the airport about ninety seconds before I board my plane. I'll do the right thing, have myself an adventure, and escape intact.

Funny how things work out.

Malik entered Menteng, a close-in 'burb, a neighborhood that was by no stretch a kampung. Menteng was green and leafy. Menteng was paved roads and street lamps. Menteng was spacious villas, orange tile roofs, and walls of concrete and hedges. Menteng was where you lived if you were a Jakarta somebody and could afford digs costing a billion rupiah and up.

Malik stopped. We pushed his becak into thick shrubbery to conceal it.

Mr. Lee always came to Menteng this time of night; he made me hide my becak here and climb this tree, he said. He pointed at a bushy banyan across the street. Keep quiet and out of sight, Mr. Lee told me. Mr. Lee was gone one or two hours. I got cold and sore being so long in the tree. One night I followed him.

To where?

Come on, Malik said.

A left, a right, and a left, and we were there, at the iron gate of a residence that need not feel inferior to its neighbors. Inside the gate was a driveway and a three-car garage. But for the flat terrain and drenching humidity we could have been in Beverly Hills. Lights were on, draperies not fully drawn.

Who lives here?

Malik didn't know. The night he followed Mr. Lee, he had gone no farther than this. I had a queasy feeling he would go farther now, though, a hunch confirmed by squeaking gate hinges. He opened the gate just wide enough to slip through. Two more hinge squeaks allowed me to make it through. Sideways.

I trailed Malik to a lighted bank of windows, thinking how overrated "adventure" was. Henceforth, I vowed, when I visit a strange land, I shall confine myself to folk dancing festivals and the cathedral.

The windows were jalousies, but the louvered panes were cranked shut despite the temperature's being a typical seventy-five or eighty degrees. Air conditioning, of course.

The windows were also high, several inches above the top of my head. I told Malik to get on my shoulders. He said no, you sit on mine, you are the holder of the ring who must see faces. I'm twice his size, but by the way he stated his position I knew he'd lose face if we didn't at least give it a try.

Malik was as solid as a pillar. Thus elevated, I pressed my face to the glass and saw a bearded Caucasian male of about forty pacing the room. Although I couldn't make out what he was saying,

even the language he was speaking, his tone and expression and jerky hand gestures suggested extreme frustration and anger. He was wearing a pistol belt, khaki shorts, and a matching shirt with epaulets.

He was ranting and raving at an Indonesian male in his thirties. Garbed in the first polyester leisure suit I had seen in over a decade, and in spite of being Javanese, a member of a slender and lithe race, he enjoyed the dimensions of a sumo wrestler.

He was dealing with the tirade by puffing furiously on a cigarette and staring at the floor. I was reminded of a circus bear whipped into submission by a sadistic trainer.

My surveillance ended as quickly as it started. Either my breath fogged the glass, attracting the bearded one's attention, or he merely happened to focus in my direction. Whichever, he began pointing at me, shouting louder. No Neck had spotted me too, and was flexing fists the size of boxing gloves.

I came off Malik's shoulders as if I had been bucked from the world's meanest rodeo bull. Verbalization was unnecessary. I lit out of there, Malik at my heels. He passed me, but I kept him in sight.

He was already in the banyan when I arrived, stretching an arm down to help me upward. Within a minute, the two men were there, almost directly below us, walking, looking, muttering.

The bearded one, looking even more like a refugee from one of those magazines that glorify mercenary soldiers, was carrying an automatic pistol. No Neck was wielding a kris. A kris with a wavy, gold-inlaid blade.

Malik and I held our breath until they passed. He whispered that we should stay the night.

Good advice. We did.

A note of interest. Jakarta is situated at seven degrees south latitude, just about as tropical as tropical can be. But if you spend the night in a banyan tree while pursued by killers, you *will* become cold.

The next morning I was afraid to go to my hotel room, afraid I had somehow been traced. An irrational and paranoid fear, true, but I stuck with Malik nonetheless. He maintained an outward calm, but we didn't travel a familiar route. He, who knew everyone, was as much a stranger as I.

'I again pleaded that we seek professional assistance. Malik re-

lented. I thought we were bound for a police precinct station. I thought otherwise when we stopped in the core of a kampung, at a wooden and corrugated iron house.

It was the home of Malik's dukun.

A dukun is a traditional Javanese mystic. A dukun is consulted for his magical powers to cure diseases, to discombobulate enemies, and to predict the future.

Swell.

If age were a valid yardstick of wisdom, we had it made. The dukun was a graybeard as old as Malik and I combined. Malik explained our dilemma, and I gave the dukun the jade ring to examine.

The dukun pondered awhile, then recited a short chant, gave us cups of foul-tasting herb tea, and handed me the ring as if it were on fire.

The ring is evil, said the dukun.

Plausible, Malik and I agreed. But what should we do?

Return it to the evildoing owner, advised the dukun. The evil departed his foul heart into the ring. It will stay locked in the green stone and infect you both until it can escape to its origin. Nor can Mr. Lee's soul depart to the abode of the dead specified by his particular religion until the ring evil escapes.

Will the ring help catch Mr. Lee's killer? I asked.

The dukun shrugged ancient, bony shoulders. He could not answer; he was a magician, not a detective.

We thanked and paid the dukun. Malik's mood had improved substantially. We have a purpose, he said, a solution.

I was not so upbeat. I wondered how to express my feelings without insulting Malik's dukun and therefore Malik too. I turned through my pocket dictionary, seeking the Indonesian words for "figurative" and "literal."

I know everyone, Malik reminded me before I could open my mouth; I'll ask around, I'll find out who the men in that splendid Menteng home are.

I repocketed my dictionary. So much for reason.

It didn't take much time or money for a network of taxi drivers and merchants and people with no apparent occupation to identify the owner of that swank Menteng address. His name, quite appropriately, was Hardcastle.

Hardcastle was either American, Canadian, or Australian. No-

body was certain. His mercenary soldier apparel was no facade. Hardcastle had been in Zimbabwe when it was Rhodesia, Zaire when it was the Belgian Congo. He was no stranger to Central America and the Indochina nations.

Hardcastle had evidently retired from the kill-for-hire profession. With a nice nest egg. Besides the villa, he owned a upscale jewelry shop on Jalan Thamrin.

Malik's sources weren't as sure about No Neck. He was believed to be an unemployed actor who did odd jobs for Hardcastle, but they were rarely seen together.

No Neck had played a villain in a dozen martial arts films, but could not or would not pull his punches. He was hurting the good guys, costing the production companies too much money. No longer would any Jakarta filmmaker risk casting him. He also had ties to an assortment of lowlife types—thugs and burglars and whatnot.

Quite a pair, I said. What do you recommend we do?

Easy, Malik said, smiling cheerily. You go see him.

Me? And say what?

You will think of the right thing to say when the time comes. I have the utmost confidence you shall.

Sure. Yeah. Easy.

Unshaven, wearing clothing for the second day, stained by banyan sap, I took a cab to a thirty story office tower on Jalan Thamrin. The lower level was a frigidly air-conditioned arcade of glittery boutiques and expensive restaurants. I could have been in the affluent maw of Chicago or Hong Kong or Berlin.

Hardcastle's shop was on the mezzanine. Gold leaf on the glass door simply announced Hardcastle, Ltd.

He was too modest. The rings, necklaces, and earrings on display sported rubies, sapphires, star sapphires, and—yes, jade. You didn't need a schooled eye to know that this stuff wasn't paste. If that wasn't enough to convince me that we weren't talking about costume jewelry, no price tags were visible and the young Indonesian clerk in the spiffy suit was as haughty as his Rodeo Drive and Fifth Avenue counterparts.

Well, perhaps my appearance and aroma put him off, but I think the young man would flare his nostrils at the Prince of Wales. I asked, please, to see Mr. Hardcastle.

Impossible, he said. Mr. Hardcastle is indisposed.

Un-indispose him, I politely requested. Inform him that I would like to speak to him regarding a gold and diamond and Burmese jade ring.

The clerk reluctantly complied. Mr. Hardcastle emerged from the back room. It was him, the bearded one. In a silk suit today, though, not the soldier of fortune outfit.

How may I serve you, sir?

Hardcastle spoke evenly, in the neutral accent of a man with no nationality. He was playing it as cool as the interior of the building, but there was a glint of recognition in his eyes.

I also played it cool, casually perusing his wares, hoping he did not hear my knees knock. No kris for sale, I commented matter-of-factly.

I deal in fine jewelry, he said, not antiques and curios.

A shame, I replied. Too bad. I'm in the market for a rare and unique example. Something in a wavy blade and gold inlay.

Hardcastle glared at his clerk, who was at the end of the counter, dusting, fussing with the goods, all ears. He retired to the rear in a hurry.

You told my boy you wanted to discuss a jade ring. What's this about a kris? Take a second gander. See any old daggers in my shop?

I do want to discuss a jade ring, I said vaguely. I described it.

Okay. Let's have a look.

Uh-uh. I don't have it on me.

You buying or selling or wasting my time? he said in a tone and with a gaze that removed any doubt that he could kill for a paycheck.

None of the above. I'm trading. Can you locate a kris of comparable worth?

Could be.

Are you interested in the jade ring?

Could be. I'll give you my address. Come to my home this evening with the ring and I should have a kris—

No, thanks, I interrupted, equal parts peeved and curious about why he persisted with the charade. He recognized me, I knew he did.

Where? he said. You name it.

I made an impulse decision. Five P.M., I blurted. The National Monument. Monas.

Hardcastle grinned and said, Monas at five it is. Don't be late.

I walked out, more frightened than before. If that were possible. It had been too easy, Hardcastle had been too agreeable. I met Malik and related the encounter.

You did well, he said; you picked the busiest place in town at one of the busiest times.

I know, I said. Maybe Hardcastle won't kill me in front of a thousand witnesses. I hope.

You did right, Malik said. You did fine.

Thanks, I guess. Do I really meet Hardcastle?

Yes. You must give him the ring. You could not have taken it to his shop. You might not have departed alive. You will give him the ring, and you will accept a kris in exchange. He will be suspicious if he acquires something for nothing.

Then?

Then we will be free of the evil.

And what about you while this is happening? I asked Malik.

He smiled. Me? he said. I will be exceedingly grateful.

The National Monument, Monumen Nasional, a white marble obelisk called Monas for short, was patterned after our Washington Monument. Another Sukarno inspiration, completed in 1961, Monas betters our needle on two counts. It has a pedestal base, and on top is a bronze flame coated with seventy-seven pounds of gold leaf.

Sukarno intended Monas as a testament to the strength of the Republic. Some Indonesians call it *paku jagat*, "axis of the world." Others, less reverent, refer to it as Sukarno's last erection.

It is located in the center of Medan Merdeka Independence Field, a square kilometer of neatly landscaped park. At five o'clock Jakarta was awakening from its afternoon siesta. People on foot and on vehicles clustered to the park.

A thousand witnesses, hell. I'd have two thousand, three thousand. Bring on Hardcastle!

I was a few minutes early. He was waiting on the south lawn midway between Monas and the adjacent street, waving to me. In gray slacks and white shirt, he looked like a tropical Western diplomat, a mid-level embassy staffer. Congeniality was written all over his face.

I was scared spitless.

But I went to him.

I stopped just out of arm's reach. A gaggle of laughing children ran between us.

Move in closer, Hardcastle said. I won't bite. I don't want to shout.

Do you have a kris? I asked, firm and businesslike.

He stepped backward. Do you have a ring?

I looked around. No Neck wasn't in sight. I stepped forward and said—words I didn't know were there tumbled out of my mouth—You killed the Chinese man in a becak.

He cheated me, Hardcastle said pleasantly.

How?

Please allow me to examine your ring.

I tossed it to him. He held it to the sky and squinted. Same one, same garbage, he said with a twisted snarl I hadn't seen on a diplomat's face lately.

I have it on good authority that the gold and diamonds are genuine and the jade is the finest Burmese jadeite, I said.

He laughed. Genuine for a no-class loser, he said. Like you. Look at yourself, you look like a transient. The setting is ten-karat gold and the diamonds are chips. The garbage is the piece of glass you're pawning off on me as jade.

I don't understand. You did business with Mr. Lee on a regular basis.

He was moving on. The authorities were putting the heat on him. I have an associate in government with wide eyes and big ears. He tipped me. Lee figured he'd rip me off as a parting shot.

Mr. Lee was smuggling?

And stealing. Hot jewels and avoidance of import duties are proportional to increased profits, he said. Phony papers aren't that difficult to secure. Plenty of governmental hands are palms up, for the grease. Every piece in my showcase is pedigreed.

Permit me a wild guess, I said. Mr. Lee was a two-way smuggler. Rubies and premium jadeite from Burma, sapphires and star sapphires out of Thailand and Sri Lanka. Gemstones in to Jakarta, to Hardcastle, Ltd.; collectible krises to Mr. Lee and ultimately the best art and curio shops in Hong Kong and Bangkok.

Not bad, Hardcastle said, slowly stepping back.

Why the disappearing act with Mr. Lee's buoy and the becak?

My colleague met Mr. Lee in the kampung. Sometimes he met

Lee there, sometimes Lee came to my home. Since I smelled a ripoff, the kampung was preferable to home. The becak boy hadn't arrived yet and—

Boy? He is older than you.

Hardcastle laughed. You know what I mean, he said. A figure of speech. Anyhow, we exchanged a kris for—

The kris Lee was killed with?

You want to hear my story, friend? Yeah, that kris. My colleague examined the ring, saw it was this phony, and the rest is, as they say, history. The becak boy turned up before my boy could dispose of the body. When the becak boy went off with you, he got rid of it at last. Where's the real ring? Cough it up.

The real ring? Then it dawned on me. Because we employed the same becak driver, I said, you decided I was affiliated with the late Mr. Lee. Did you think I was replacing him?

You aren't?

I shook my head. I am but a humble travel writer. Why, by the way, are you being so candid with me?

I have a hunch you're telling the truth, friend. It's a shame you aren't the businessman I thought you were, Hardcastle said. He grinned, dropped the ring, and walked off.

I answered my own question, and the answer was highly relevant to the saying about dead men telling no tales. Hardcastle's subtle backstepping had drawn us to the edge of the street.

I scanned the traffic, desperately searching for a needle in a moving haystack of cars, bicycles, motorbikes, trucks, and three-wheeled taxis. There he was! No Neck, dwarfing a motor scooter, veering toward me, scant meters away, two or three seconds away, unbuttoning his jacket, exposing the golden glint of a kris hilt.

I lurched back and stumbled, barely keeping upright. No Neck bore in, fist wrapped around the hilt. Ready to fillet me with a single slash and vanish into the anonymity of Jakarta traffic, my thousands of witnesses instead a human screen.

Malik appeared, his arms a blur. A piece of debris, a two by four, something like that, thrown in No Neck's path. The scooter nose up, flipping, No Neck on the pavement, on his back. Malik gone, blended into the crowd. Policemen, three of them, in uniform, presenting badges and guns to the dazed No Neck.

I completely lost my balance. I landed on my butt, on the grass and on something hard and sharp. The ring.

The morning after.

Lots happening. The body of an unidentified adult male Caucasian in gray slacks and white shirt was found floating in a canal. I wonder who. In another story, a gangster and former movie actor was arrested at Medan Merdeka with a kris that resembled one recently stolen from a museum. The Jakarta press was having a field day.

I saw Malik to say goodbye. The appearance of the police had been no coincidence. Malik, who knew everyone, had arranged it via third parties, thus staying clear of the mess himself.

I gave him the ring. He was grateful. I said nonsense, it was the least I could do for the man who saved my life.

He said that his dukun had advised that since Hardcastle, the evildoer, had touched the ring, the evil had escaped to its source.

Poor Hardcastle, we commiserated. We came to the conclusion that No Neck had thought, however incorrectly, that Hardcastle had set him up.

What will you do with the ring? I asked.

For the gold and diamond chips, my jeweler will pay the equivalent of four hundred American dollars, he said; as much as I earn in one year.

Retirement? I asked. Return to your home village?

And do what? No, he said; I will save the money and spend it when need be.

Including paying fishermen to rescue your becak?

He smiled. Maybe, he said. Maybe my becak will be Jakarta's last.

While waiting at the airport I read the afternoon edition of Jakarta's English-language paper. The kris No Neck carried was discovered to be a fake, a reproduction of the type peddled to gullible tourists. The police were hanging on to him, though. There were plenty of other things about which they wished to chat.

I wondered where the real kris was. I supposed Hardcastle had taken that secret to his grave.

My flight was announced. I got on the plane and flew to Bali.

Whiteout

by Kenneth Gavrell

When I was halfway up the top lift, the snow began to come in light flurries. I thought I might make it down before it really started, but by the time I pushed back the safety bar, it was coming thick enough to warm any sentimentalist's heart on Christmas Eve and to freeze any intermediate skier's on an icy mountain top. The LIFT SKI TIPS sign could only be read when it was too late. I hoped no people were standing at the bottom of the lift exit because I'd hit them as soon as I saw them.

There were five or six people all right, but they were standing well back from the exit. There are no dummies at the top of the mountain. I joined them at the edge and peered down through the kind of snowfall that looks like a heavy fog. Whiteout. I wouldn't be able to see a damned thing till I got below the snow line. Two young hotshots with jeans and curly locks let out a whoop and pushed off like down-hill racers. The rest looked more tentative. They started down slowly, angling among the ghostly pine trees. The snow had already covered the yellow

ice patches which had been clearly visible in the noonday sun. I slipped my pole straps over my wrists and started down too.

Thick snowflakes beat against my goggles and the wind howled in my ears. Those two kids must know the mountain very well. For a skier like me, it was a question of keeping the speed down and skiing entirely with the legs. You couldn't see the configuration of the terrain, only feel it when you hit it; your knees had to be your shock absorbers. You couldn't be too low on your skis.

I descended the steep slope, swinging around each tree as it suddenly loomed in front of me, and finally came out on the Meadow, a long, wide, almost treeless area that would take me a good distance toward the midway lift. The Meadow was all big moguls. I couldn't see anyone through the veil of white. I swung down through the giant hills, the snow powdering from my chattering skis, and discovered that the old legs still had enough left even for conditions like these. That was gratifying.

Near the bottom, the Meadow



THERE WAS NO TIME TO AVOID IT AND I HIT IT STRAIGHT ON AND WENT
OVER THE TIPS IN THE WORST KIND OF FALL.

ALFRED HITCHCOCK
mystery magazine March 1991

leveled off and smoothed out, and I stood up on the skis to relax my muscles a minute. That's when I saw something low, grey, and bulky through the white veil just ahead. A rock. There was no time to avoid it and I hit it straight on and went over the tips in the worst kind of fall. I sailed across it into a bone-cracking collision with the icy snow, head first. The bindings gave, or I might have been missing a leg or two.

My mouth and nose were full of snow, my goggles were banged back into my hair, and my right hand hurt like hell where I'd fallen on it. But otherwise I was in reparable condition. I lay for a few seconds, breathing heavily in the thin cold air, and then pushed myself warily to my feet. Everything hurt. I looked back at the rock, but now it didn't look like a rock.

I backed up a bit, dragging my loose skis by the safety straps, to see what it was.

Under a thin layer of snow lay the hunched body of a man. Something about his absolute and final immobility told me he was dead.

When I bent over to examine him more closely, I found bullet wounds—three of them, in a tight pattern in the lower chest. His face had the calmness of contented sleep—eyes closed, skin still warm. He was about

thirty-five, goodlooking, and judging from his outfit, well-heeled. He looked like a man without any problems, except that he had been shot to death.

Five minutes later I finally got my skis, boots, poles, and goggles straightened out and was starting down the slope once more. There didn't seem to be anybody else left up on the mountain. I reached the spot where the trail cut off to the left through some scattered trees toward the midway lift. Here there was a smooth icy stretch I remembered from earlier in the day, and I schussed it. Suddenly a stationary figure materialized out of the white just in front of me. I pulled up. It was a woman, resting. She regarded me curiously through her yellow goggles.

"There's a body back there in the snow." I spoke loudly because of the wind.

"What?" she said.

I pointed back toward the Meadow. "A man—shot."

"Are you crazy?" She lifted her goggles. She was young, pretty, brunette, a ski bunny type, even to the powder blue outfit that showed off her curves.

"Forget it," I said and pushed off toward the lift. When I reached it, there were only a few skiers gathered there and they weren't going back up—the lift had been shut down because of

the weather on top—they were taking a break before continuing down. But the lift operator was sitting in his shack, and I yelled to him to telephone to the bottom for the ski patrol with a sled; someone was seriously hurt above. He put down his magazine, picked up the phone, and asked me how seriously hurt. I let his question sink in and told him he'd better telephone for the cops too.

Two hours later I was sitting in the town police station. There were three others in the office: the police chief, another cop, and my buddy Joe Scully, with whom I'd driven out to Colorado for five days' vacation. That made four cops in all. Joe and I work in the Missing Persons Division back home.

The chief, named Hewitt, was an old cop who spent most of his time worrying about drunken kids tearing up the local bars. Maybe he had an occasional incident of wife beating or a traffic accident, but I didn't think he'd seen many homicides.

We were all drinking coffee.

"Quite a coincidence, your being a cop," the chief said.

"Cops ski too," I said.

"How come your buddy wasn't up there with you?"

"I quit early," Joe said. "I get cold."

"He prefers to do most of his

skiing at the lodge bar," I explained.

The chief lit another cigarette. He smoked a lot of cigarettes. "Did you hear anything like shots?" he asked. "That guy hadn't been dead long when you found him."

"I didn't hear any shots," I said. "The wind might have carried the sound in another direction."

"You may have been too far up the mountain," the chief said. "There was nobody around the body at all?"

"No. Everybody was scooting down. There was no visibility whatsoever near the top."

"Funny place to shoot somebody," the chief said.

"I'd say it was a damned near perfect place," Joe offered.

"You guys ever worked a homicide?" asked Hewitt.

"I was in Homicide three years," I said.

"Not me," Joe said.

"Maybe you'll be able to give me a few pointers, Timothy," the chief said to me. "I've only been on three killings—all family stuff, no mystery about them. This one will take some work."

"What have you got so far?" I asked.

He slurped a cup of coffee. "His name is Claude Wingfield, age thirty-seven, lawyer, comes from Des Moines. He drives a '79 Honda Accord—my boys lo-

cated it in the parking lot. Seems he was out here alone, which is unusual. I don't know if he's married—we're checking on that. Waiting on the autopsy for more information. But we found three spent .32 automatic cases near the body."

"Where was he staying?"

"At Green Pine Lodge. We found the key in his pocket. I sent someone down there."

The door opened and another cop appeared. "The victim's married, chief. I talked to his wife on the phone. She's flying out. She'll get here sometime this evening."

The chief looked satisfied. "When were you two planning on leaving?"

"Tomorrow," Joe said.

"Well, keep in touch until then, will you? You might be able to help us out."

"Sure," I said. I wrote down our hotel and room number and slid it across the desk to him. "We'll check back here after dinner," I said.

"Good."

Joe and I went down the street to the first bar we saw and had a couple of beers. The bartender, a big red-faced Scandinavian type, asked us if we'd heard about the murder on the mountain. We said we had. At six o'clock we walked back to our hotel, showered, and then went

out to dinner at a place called the Top Sirloin, with a phony Old West decor. By the time we finished eating it was almost eight. We returned to the police station. Chief Hewitt was sitting behind his desk drinking coffee.

"Sit down." He motioned us toward two empty chairs. "We have the results of the autopsy."

"Is Mrs. Wingfield here yet?" I asked.

He shook his head. "She has to change planes at Denver. It'll take a while."

"What does the autopsy say?"

"Three in the lower chest from a .32. Very close range, a yard or so at the most. One pierced the heart. Death was almost instantaneous. What do you think? It sounds to me like it might be a woman: a small-caliber gun at such close range. The guy was married; he came out here skiing without his wife, wasn't wearing a wedding ring."

"Men also carry .32 automatics," I said.

"I think he was hustling," the chief said. "The hotel says he arrived alone, rented a single room."

"How long had he been in town?"

"Three days."

"Did he bring any girls to his room?"

"Who knows? The place is too big to notice that sort of thing."

"There's not much you can do until you talk to his wife," I suggested.

He grunted assent. "She should be here in a couple of hours."

"Where's an interesting place to have a drink in the meantime?"

"Try the Red Lantern. Nice atmosphere—like a club. It doesn't get too many kids." He gave us directions.

It was still snowing outside. The town, a former mining center, looked postcard-picturesque under the snowfall. The streets were full of skiers, bar-hopping in noisy groups, but the Red Lantern was a more sedate place. It had chandeliers, a long dark wood bar, plush stools, and candles on the tables. Behind the bar an ornate mirror reflected the chandeliers. The wallpaper was red with black arabesques.

"You like this place?" Joe asked me.

"It's quiet."

"Too grand for my taste," he said.

"Do you feel like walking through the snow some more?"

"No," he admitted.

We took stools at the bar. Joe ordered a Coors and I asked for a margarita—the setting may have suggested it. The bartender was a slightly built man in black bow tie and white shirt-sleeves—and red arm garters. I thought that was overdoing it.

When we ordered a second round, the bartender asked us if we were skiers.

"Isn't everybody?" Joe said. "Why do you ask?"

"I heard you talking," the bartender said. "I thought you might be cops."

"Do you get to see a lot of cops?"

"Not here, but I tended bar in Chicago for twenty years. I got to know cops pretty well." He wiped the clean bar with a clean cloth. "And I figured, well, what with the murder—"

"You're right," I told him. "We are cops. But we came out here to ski."

"I saw the guy," the bartender said.

"What?"

"He was in here last night."

"How do you know it was the guy?"

"A fellow who works at the hospital dropped in earlier this evening. He told me his name was Wingfield—tall, goodlooking, mid-thirties. Well, a guy named Wingfield following that description was drinking here last night."

"How'd you know his name?"

"He paid the bill with a credit card. But that's not the main reason; it was the blonde on his arm that made him stick in my mind. She was wearing one of those see-through blouses."

I could see cop-curiosity in

Joe's face. I was leaning across the bar myself. "Yeah?" Joe asked.

"They weren't here too long, maybe forty-five minutes. They were both pretty high. It looked like they were making a round of the night spots and they'd been to several before they got here."

"Chummy?" Joe suggested.

"Couldn't be much chummier. I thought you guys were out here to ski," the bartender said.

"What'd she look like?" Joe asked.

"Like everybody's dream. Long blonde hair, blue eyes, the kind of figure you imagine but don't often see."

"You should be ashamed of yourself," I joked.

"I'm only forty-five," he said. "My knee still jumps when you hit it with a hammer."

"Did you hear any of their conversation?" I asked.

"No. They sat at a table. That table." He pointed to one in a corner under a red wall lamp. "There was one other thing that made me remember him. When they left, he told me to add five dollars for the tip."

"Trying to impress the blonde," I suggested.

"She didn't seem to need any impressing."

"If you see her again, I think Chief Hewitt at the station would be interested to hear."

"I don't like getting involved."

"This was a murder," Joe reminded him.

"You're right," the bartender said. "If I see her, I'll tell the chief."

After the second drink, Joe wanted to move on. We tried two more bars, but the first was full of young kids and loud music and the second had sawdust on the floor and barrels for stools. It also had piped-in country and western music. But we ordered two beers. While I was paying for them, a girl walked up and gave me the once-over.

"You're the madman from the mountain."

"I'm the what?"

"I recognize your jacket." She gestured to my ski jacket, red with yellow stripes. "I thought you were nuts when you told me about a man being shot."

I recognized her then. She looked even prettier without her cap and goggles and in her tight black sweater, but still like a ski bunny.

"Hello again," I said. "Do you want to join us?"

"All right."

Joe made room between us. He also shot me a very meaningful, if not envious, look.

"What's your name?"

"Connie Petersen."

"Bob Timothy. My friend is

Joe Scully. What are you drinking?"

"Beer's fine."

I ordered it.

"I suppose I should apologize," she said.

"Under the circumstances it was very understandable," I said.

"All anyone's talking about is the murder."

"I've noticed."

"You must feel funny, being the one who found him."

"I felt pretty funny then," I admitted.

She crinkled her lovely blue-grey eyes. "I like you. How long are you staying?"

"We're leaving tomorrow morning."

"Oh," she said, disappointed. Then, abruptly, "I'd better be going. My boyfriend's waiting for me."

"How come he's not with you?"

"He's not my jailer," she said flippantly.

She grabbed her coat from a peg near the bar. "Well, maybe I'll see you around."

"Could be."

She went out through the swinging doors and pushed open the glass door beyond.

"You blew it," Joe said. "I'll be damned if you didn't blow it."

The bartender came up with Connie's beer. Joe and I shared it, then I suggested we go back to the police station.

* * *

Mrs. Wingfield had arrived fifteen minutes before us. She was in the chief's office. He'd given instructions to send us in if we turned up.

She was handsome and slightly overweight, in her early thirties. She was wearing charcoal grey slacks, a heavy cream-colored sweater, and a suede coat lined with lamb's wool. She turned to the door as we entered and the chief introduced us. Her eyes were dry and she looked very self-possessed.

"Mrs. Wingfield was just telling me about her husband," the chief said. He gave me a quick glance that implied it was an earful.

We sat down.

"So he left on Friday morning," the chief continued, "and arrived here Saturday night. Was he in the habit of taking vacations alone, Mrs. Wingfield?"

"We both have, for many years now." She had a dry, grating voice.

"You didn't get along very well?"

"We'd been married for eleven years. The first two were all right."

"Do you think it's possible your husband was involved with another woman here?"

"Quite possible."

"He'd done that sort of thing before?"

"Oh, yes. Claude was a womanizer. He preferred big-chested, blue-eyed blondes. You notice I'm dark."

"Your husband was seen with a blonde woman last night, Mrs. Wingfield," I interrupted.

The chief raised his eyes at this. This time his eyes said it wouldn't have hurt if I'd filled him in first.

Mrs. Wingfield shrugged her shoulders. "It might have been Marilyn Losser."

"Who's Marilyn Losser?" the chief asked.

"His most recent flame, as far as I know. Somebody else's wife. One of my friends was kind enough to tell me about it."

"All the indications are that your husband came out here alone," the chief said.

"Then I'm afraid I can't help you," she said.

"Do you know the address of this Marilyn Losser?" I asked.

"No. You could try the Des Moines telephone book."

"Do you have any children, Mrs. Wingfield?" I asked.

"No. I suppose you're wondering why I stayed with him. The answer's very simple. Money. I'm not used to doing without it and I'm not very good at making it myself."

"You're very blunt," I said.

"It facilitates things, doesn't it?" she replied bitterly. "What else would you like to know?"

"Did Mr. Wingfield have any enemies who might want to kill him?" the chief asked.

"You mean besides Marilyn Losser's husband? Yes, quite a few, I imagine." She paused and asked the chief for a cigarette. He passed the pack across and lit one for her. "Claude wasn't an especially likeable man. He wasn't a bad person, but his manner was a bit too self-confident, distant, forceful. He smelled of success. He'd made a name for himself in Des Moines, especially after the scandal two years ago."

"What was that?"

"There was a big political scandal—misuse of municipal funds, bribes, kickbacks. One of the people involved committed suicide."

"What was your husband's part in that?"

"He exposed it. He wasn't a professional do-gooder, but he had information on some people and saw that it would suit his career to make the mess public, so he did."

Chief Hewitt cleared his throat.

"Do you want to see the body now? We need positive identification. But it can wait till tomorrow."

"I'll see it now," she said.

He rose. "I'll have one of my men take you."

"Thank you."

"Do you have a hotel room?"
"I hoped you could help me with that."

"Of course," the chief said.
"I'm willing to stay here as long as you need me," Mrs. Wingfield said, "but I don't want to stay any longer than that."

"I understand," the chief said and went to fetch one of his men.

Joe wanted to get an early start next morning. I wanted to see Chief Hewitt first.

"I'll start packing the stuff on the car," Joe said. "Don't take all morning. It's not your case."

I met Hewitt and another cop coming out of the station as I was going in.

"You're just in time to join us for a walk," Hewitt said.

"Where to?"

"Green Pine Lodge."

"What's up?"

"Wingfield had a fight with a guy in a bar Monday night. The bar's just down the street from the Green Pine. The fight, apparently, was over a woman—a blonde."

"How did you get that information?"

"Three people volunteered it after they saw Wingfield's picture in last night's paper. One of them knew the other guy. He's staying at the Green Pine. Same as Wingfield was."

For an older man, the chief was a fast walker. We covered

the four blocks to the lodge in as many minutes.

Green Pine Lodge was a three story affair with a lobby full of big-leaved plants. It had oiled wooden walls, a shiny red-tiled floor, and, to the left of the reception desk, a brick fireplace. Two youngish clerks stood behind the desk.

Chief Hewitt asked to see Mrs. Muller.

One of the clerks knocked on a door behind the desk and a woman opened it from inside. The clerk spoke to her a moment and pointed to us. She called, "Come on in, chief. I've been expecting you."

We walked through the hinged counter and into the office. The chief shut the door after him and introduced me to Mrs. Muller. She took a seat at her desk and we dropped into comfortable armchairs.

She was a woman of about fifty-five—vigorous-looking, with long limbs and fancy inlaid eyeglasses on a gold chain. She looked as if she could handle not only Green Pine Lodge but half of the rest of the town as well. "Well," she said, "I suppose it's about that killing."

"I'm afraid so, Mrs. Muller."

"First time we've ever had anything like that here. The place is fifteen years old."

"It didn't happen here," the

chief said. "It happened up on the mountain."

"Still, it was one of our guests."

"True. To tell you the truth, Mrs. Muller, I'm here to check out another of your guests. I don't know his name, but he's about five feet ten, has black hair and a bad complexion. Maybe a hundred and seventy pounds—age thirty or so."

"Staying here alone?"

"I don't know."

"I'll ask the desk clerk."

She went out and returned about three minutes later. "It sounds like a man named Aaron—Room 26 on the second floor. He shares the room with a man named Kozinsky. Why are you looking for him?"

"Just a routine inquiry," the chief said.

"I'm not anxious to have the place become notorious," she said.

"It won't, Mrs. Muller. We'll just see if Mr. Aaron's in."

The chief unsnapped his holster and motioned to the other cop to do the same. We walked down the hall to 26 and Hewitt knocked. There was the sound of footsteps and the door swung open. A man in a T-shirt and ski pants stood looking at us. He matched the chief's description perfectly.

"I'm the chief of police," Hew-

itt told him. "Do you mind if we come in a minute?"

The man backed off to let us enter. "What's this about?"

"Could I see some identification?" the chief asked.

The man pulled his wallet out of a back pocket in his pants and handed it to Hewitt, who checked the driver's license. "Frank Aaron, San Francisco," he verified.

"So?" Aaron said.

The chief handed him back his wallet. "You're here with a friend?"

"That's right. Ralph. He's already out on the slopes. I'm on the way there myself."

"You had a fight at the Silver Lode a couple of nights ago, I understand."

"Maybe. What about it?"

"Know who the guy was?"

"Sure—that dude that's staying down at the end of the hall. The one who thinks he's a movie star."

"Know his name?"

"Nope. I never asked him."

"I guess you haven't been reading the papers," the chief said. "His name was Wingfield, and he was shot to death up on the mountain yesterday afternoon. How come you don't know about it?"

"I haven't been out of this room since four o'clock yesterday afternoon. I was beat. Slept for twelve hours."

It was the wrong reaction. Too pat. He was lying.

"What was the fight about, Mr. Aaron?" the chief asked.

"If you know about the fight, you should know what it was about."

"You tell me."

"It was over a woman, for God's sake. I was drunk and I tried to move in on the blonde he was with. I wouldn't have tried it if I'd been sober. He got sore. I guess I was pretty obnoxious. But it never got beyond some shouting and a couple of broken glasses."

"Who was the blonde?" I asked him.

"The best-looking woman I've seen in a long time. She was wearing a see-through blouse." He looked from me to Hewitt, then back at me. "Why the hell are you asking me? Ask at the desk. She's staying here."

"It's all coming together," the chief said.

"Do you own a gun, Mr. Aaron?" I asked.

"No," he said. Then he looked down at his shoes. "All right, so I own a gun. You'd find out anyway. What does that prove?"

"You have it with you?"

"It's in the glove compartment of my car, in the lot."

"Show this officer your car," the chief told him. "Let's see if the blonde lady love is in," he said to me.

Aaron went out to the lot with the other cop while the chief and I checked back at the desk. The blonde in question was registered as Jill Howells, Room 9. We walked to the room and knocked. There was no answer and the door was locked.

"Would you know where the lady in Room 9 might be?" Hewitt asked the desk clerk.

"She may be gone. She's only paid through last night."

"You didn't see her go out?"

"No."

"I'd like to have a look at the room," the chief said.

The clerk pulled a key from a hook below the counter and we returned to Room 9. But there wasn't a thing there except an unmade bed, used towels, and the door key on the bureau.

"Not even a stray bobby pin," the chief remarked after we had a look around.

Back at the desk we asked to see the registration card again. Mrs. Muller came out of her office and watched us. The card gave a home address in Omaha. The part about car information was blank.

"Where's her car information?" I asked the clerk.

"She must have come in by plane," he said.

"Then she'd need a taxi to get back to the airport this morning."

He shrugged. "She didn't ask for one at the desk."

"You're interested in this woman too?" Mrs. Muller asked.

"She seems to have known Wingfield," the chief said.

The policeman entered the lobby with Aaron. In the cop's hand was a Colt .38.

"Did you find anything else interesting in the car?" the chief asked him. He shook his head no. "Put the gun back," the chief said. He turned to Aaron, who looked cold after his excursion outside in his T-shirt. "Okay, that's all. When are you planning to leave town?"

"Friday."

"Fine," the chief said. "If we need you for anything, we'll get in touch."

Aaron walked upstairs. The chief thanked Mrs. Muller for her help and we started back toward the station.

"Aaron's lying about not knowing about the murder," I said. "But I don't think he's involved—just scared."

"Not unless he owns two guns," Hewitt said.

"The girl's Omaha address is a phony. Check Des Moines. But I don't think you'll turn up much. The name's a phony, too."

"It might just be a coincidence, their being in the same hotel," Hewitt said.

"Might be."

"What time are you leaving?"

"An hour ago. Joe must be frothing at the mouth."

"Well, thanks for your help," he said.

"Good luck."

He just frowned and kept on walking.

We drove through the mountains with snow twelve feet deep beside the road. We drove through slushy Denver. It was a clear afternoon and we watched the blue Rockies dwindle on the horizon for a hundred miles. That night we stayed at a motel in Ogallala. The next morning we continued northward across flat, dull Nebraska, where we hit a blizzard around North Platte, then through Omaha and on into flat, dull Iowa. The weather was grey and dreary the second day. We ate at truck stops. Joe consistently exceeded the fifty-five-mile speed limit. He said that driving under seventy on Interstate 80 was like shoveling snow with a teaspoon. Every three hours we switched the driving. By nine in the evening we were passing Des Moines.

"About time to stop for a motel," I suggested.

"Don't you want to push through?"

"Why strain ourselves?"

"Saves some money," Joe said.

"The tab's on me," I said.

"You know what I think?"

"No. What?"

"I bet as soon as we reach a motel you're going to make a phone call to a local blonde named Marilyn Losser."

"Could be."

"I'd be willing to bet quite a lot on it," Joe said.

There were only two Lossers in the phone book, and I hit her on the first try. Luckily she answered and not her husband.

"Mrs. Losser, my name's Lieutenant Bob Timothy. I'm a policeman."

"What is it?" she said anxiously. "Has someone had an accident?"

"In a way," I said. "The person involved is Claude Wingfield."

"I never heard of him," she said, still sounding worried. "What is this?"

"He's been involved in an accident. I'm on the case. I realize you can't talk on the phone."

"No," she said, "I can't."

"I can come by your place in the morning while your husband's at work. Or, if you prefer, we can meet somewhere."

"How do I know you're on the up-and-up?"

"I'm trying to avoid any problems for you," I said.

"I'd prefer the second alternative," she said after a pause.

"You have a car?"

"Yes."

"What about in the coffee shop

of the Colonial Motel? It's near the interstate."

"I know where it is. All right."

"Ten o'clock tomorrow morning?"

"That's fine," she said. "I'll be wearing a yellow coat." She hung up.

Joe had been listening from his bed. "I think it would be better if I met her alone," I said. "Two of us might scare her. She's half expecting a showdown."

The next morning was grey and chilly. We had breakfast in the coffee shop, then at a quarter to ten Joe went back upstairs and I waited, watching through the window. Almost exactly fifteen minutes later, a blue Nova pulled up outside and a very pretty blonde in a yellow coat got out. She was alone.

When she came through the door, she looked around uncertainly. Her eyes fell on me, and I signaled her toward the table. She angled through the crowded restaurant, and all the men in the place accompanied her with their eyes until she slid into the seat across from me.

"You're the policeman."

"That's right."

"Let me see your badge."

I showed it to her. She was nervous. She didn't look at it closely enough to see that it was out of state.

"What's this about Claude Wingfield? You ruined a night's sleep for me."

"He's been shot." I watched her face. Either it was a real shock or she was a wonderful actress.

"Is it bad?" she said. "Who did it?"

"We don't know who did it. That's why I'm here. It's bad."

"How bad?" Her blue eyes searched my face.

"He's dead."

She started to cry. It was real crying—there was no faking that. I remembered, by contrast, what Wingfield's wife's reaction had been.

I waited for her to pull herself together. "Was your husband in town on Tuesday, Mrs. Losser?"

She blew her nose. "Jack? Don't be crazy. Jack would never do a thing like that."

"Are you sure?"

"I haven't seen Claude since last summer. Women didn't last long with Claude. Jack suspected—he hated Claude—but he's not the type—"

"Was he in town on Tuesday?"

"Jack hasn't been out of town since he went fishing in Canada last July." She was clenching her wet, balled handkerchief. "God, I can't believe it. How did it happen?"

"He was on a skiing vacation in Colorado. Someone shot him to death on the slopes."

"And you have no idea who?"

"An idea or two—yes. Not much in the way of facts yet."

"I never quite got over Claude," she said as if talking to herself. "I'm sorry, but I can't help you, Lieutenant Timothy. I can't think who might have shot him."

"Do you know of any other blonde woman he'd been seeing recently?"

"No. Do you think it was a woman?"

"He was with a blonde out there. She disappeared right after the murder."

"I've been in town all week," she said defensively. "I can prove that in two minutes."

"You don't have to prove it. I believe you."

"And so has my husband," she said.

"I'm sorry I wasted your time, Mrs. Losser. Do you want a cup of coffee?"

"Yes," she said.

"Well?" Joe said as I came in.

"She's not the blonde we're looking for."

"What about the husband?"

"She says he hasn't left town."

"Well, are you ready to go home?"

"Not yet. I want to call Mrs. Wingfield. She's probably back in town. Throw me that phone book. And after I talk to her, I think I'm going to pay a visit to the Des Moines *Register*.

"What for?" Joe asked.

"To look at pictures."

We waited till six o'clock to drive over. Most people are home around dinnertime.

The apartment house was in a nice part of town. Joe was wearing his gun. There was a guard at the entrance, but when we flashed our badges he let us through. The inner lobby was marble and there were paintings on the walls. We took the elevator up to the sixth floor and got out into a carpeted hallway with indirect lighting. The apartment we wanted was the last on the right. We could hear the faint sound of a radio or stereo through the solid door. Joe stood off to the side against the wall. I planted myself in front of the peephole and knocked.

The first knock brought no response. I knocked again, louder. The peephole slid open. There was a pause, then the door opened a bit, and I saw her pretty face through the crack.

"You," she said. "How in the world—"

"Mind if I come in?"

"I don't know—" There was a chain on the door.

"It's pretty uncomfortable talking like this," I said.

She hesitated, then slipped the chain I pushed through fast, and Joe was right behind me.

Before she fully comprehended the situation, he'd closed the door behind us.

"What the hell is this?" she said angrily.

"You're a pretty fearless girl," I said. "But I guess if you can kill somebody you've got to be fearless."

"Who are you guys?"

I took out my badge and so did Joe. She studied them carefully. "Aren't you a little bit off your beat?"

"I'm on my beat," I said. "You forget—I'm the one who fell over his body."

"I don't know what you're doing here or what you're talking about," she said. She snapped off the radio. Her lovely blue-grey eyes were flashing. The beige negligee she was wearing showed enough of her figure to explain why that see-through blouse would make grown men do silly things.

"From what I hear, you must be even more fetching as a blonde, Miss Brower. Or do you prefer Petersen—or Howells?"

"Get out of here."

"Why don't we sit down?"

"I said get out."

"All right, I'll sit down." Joe remained on his feet. So did she, fuming.

"You really had us running around," I said. "That blonde hair was a neat, if obvious, idea. He was a guy who went for

blondes. Whose idea was it to go out to Colorado separately?"

She stared at me.

"And whose idea was the separate rooms? His, I'll bet. He liked to be careful. He was an up-and-coming man in this town. Up-and-coming as a result of what he'd done to your father and several other politicians here. But only your father broke down and committed suicide."

A strange noise came from her throat.

"The idea of the Colorado trip suited you perfectly, didn't it? You thought you'd never be connected with his being murdered out there. On the day you killed him, you redyed your hair to its natural color. That was necessary so that he'd recognize you before you shot him. Most revenge murderers need that satisfaction. It also facilitated your leaving town; you'd been seen around with him as a blonde—a very noticeable blonde. Are you ready to go downtown to the station?"

Suddenly she looked very tired—the way they look when they know they've had it. I saw Joe relax.

She went over to a wall table and plucked a cigarette from a pack lying on top. Then she searched for a light. I reached into my pocket for my lighter but before I'd brought it out she'd opened the table drawer

and come up with a .32 automatic in her hand.

Joe spit out a nasty word and I dropped the lighter. She held the gun on us with remarkable steadiness.

"The penalty for being male chauvinists," she said sarcastically. "You'd have been more careful if I were a man."

"You can't shoot both of us before one jumps you," I said.

"Don't underestimate me. My father trained me to use this. He said a girl needed to know how to protect herself."

Joe repeated the nasty word.

"I don't want to shoot you," she said. "I just want to get out."

"Where can you go?"

"I'll take my chances. Move over there next to your friend."

I got off the chair and did as she said. The gun was very steady. She reached behind her with her left hand, pulled open the drawer next to the one that had held the gun, and took out a handful of the sort of heavy hemp cord that's used for tying large parcels.

"Tie each other's ankles with this." She threw the loose cord toward us. It made it only half-way. She came across the room and kicked at it. She was now about five feet from us, and Joe did a foolhardy thing: he made a hard kick for the gun in her right hand. With nine women out of ten it might have worked,

but she had the shot off before his foot struck her hand. I saw him go down as the gun flew back over her shoulder, landing next to the sofa. We both dived for it, but she had her hand on it before we reached it. I grabbed her wrist with both hands and put on all the pressure I could. Her grasp on the automatic loosened quickly, but not before we'd tumbled around a bit and she'd dug her teeth into my arm. Even after she dropped the gun she didn't stop fighting, lashing out at me with her hands and feet and landing one very good kick into my left shin. Finally I had to bear-hug her from behind to protect myself. Joe was getting to his feet. "Where'd it hit you?" I asked.

"Shoulder. I'll be all right." He held his hand against the wound. His face showed that the slug hurt.

"Get your gun out," I said. "I can't hold her like this forever."

"I thought maybe you were enjoying it," Joe said and got his gun out.

As I'd expected, she wasn't very cooperative downtown, but we gradually got the story. It was essentially as I'd surmised. If ever a man had helped to arrange his own murder it was Claude Wingfield. He had made the play for her, had proposed the ski vacation, and suggested all the precautions. He'd had

some paranoid notion that his wife was having him followed for an expensive divorce action.

On the day of the murder, she had said she was tired and would stay at the lodge. He'd gone up the mountain himself, and she had then redyed her hair blonde, left the lodge, and found him on the slopes. The snowfall had been providential, but she would have shot him in a deserted spot in any case.

While she was coming out with it, Joe put a call through to Chief Hewitt to tell him his homicide was solved.

The next morning we were on Route 80 again. I drove because of Joe's shoulder.

"When did you suspect it might be the blonde?" he asked.

"That night at the bar. Some murderers are like a person with a scab—they can't leave it alone. She had to have a few words with the man who had found her victim. But my real suspicion started when the Losser lead didn't pan out. That's when I rethought everything and decided to check the municipal-scandal angle. The call to Mrs. Wingfield gave me the information that the man who'd committed suicide had a daughter about the right age. The trip to the *Register's* photo files told me the daughter was our blonde from Colorado. Then it was just a question of checking

the phone book."

"Too bad you didn't do this on your own beat," Joe said.

"Maybe Chief Hewitt will put in a good word for us," I said. "You know, in one respect this

has a happy ending."

"How?"

"Mrs. Wingfield gets to keep his money without having to keep her miserable excuse for a husband."

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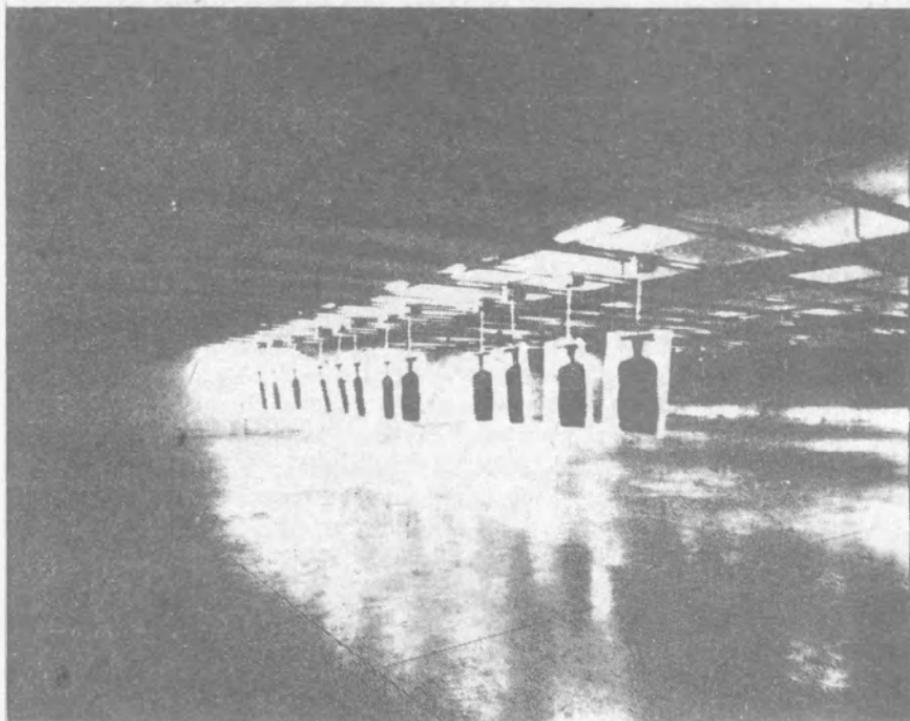


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Storm over Longvalley

by Jessica Callow

“I’m finding it hard to understand how Harry Bagley could have been killed, in full view of your market, without anybody seeing or hearing anything.” Chief Constable Leonard Hurley stood at our upstairs apartment window, his powerful blue eyes critically examining the vacant lot almost opposite, lit now by a full moon sailing free of the storm clouds. “Emma, from this window there’s a clear view all over that lot where the old house used to be. You say some of you looked out here at about the time we’re interested in. Right past the front of your place Bagley would have gone, and possibly whoever killed him. Nobody here—folks coming and going in the market downstairs, you folks looking out this window—nobody sees or hears a thing?”

“It’s bright moonlight now, chief. When we looked out before, the storm was at its worst. A black night. Rain coming down in sheets. A blackout it was out there, except when lightning was flashing. I could barely see to the middle of the street after that rain got going. Didn’t see a single soul.”

“It’s Friday night, Earl.” The chief turned to where my husband sat, a bit dazed to be sure, on the couch. “Open till ten. Friday night, one of your busiest; people in and out right up to your closing time.” He sounded reproachful. “Let me have the names, Earl, of who was in your place, either coming or just leaving at about—say, from nine o’clock on.”

They went at it together. When I came back with a cup of coffee for the chief, he was closing his notebook. Earl was saying: “Thunder rumbling, real bad lightning from nine on. People who hadn’t shopped by then were putting it off to Saturday. Ron and I had all the produce brought in from the front by nine. After the storm hit at around nine thirty there wasn’t a soul. I let Ron go at nine twenty-five. Polly went upstairs soon after. Emma, she’d her bridge club here from seven o’clock on. It was the ladies leaving at eleven, shortcircuiting across the lot, who found him.”

Polly Wainwright, a distant cousin of Earl’s, has lived with us for five years or more, helping in the market. Ron Blake, he’s the



I COULD SEE WHY REGGIE WAS SO TAKEN. IT WAS A SORT OF LIVELY FIRE SHE HAD THAT MADE HER ESPECIALLY ATTRACTIVE.

ALFRED HITCHCOCK
mystery magazine March 1991

high school kid who works for Earl weeknights, weekends, and holidays. I manage the post office downstairs and do the book-keeping for the shop. Earl and I have operated the grocery market and post office for twenty-four years. Our place is a bit old fashioned in this small town of Longvalley. Even so, we pride ourselves that you can get what you need in our general store. We've a hardware line as well as meats, groceries, and produce that's locally grown. All the country round about Longvalley, fifteen thousand people now, is farmland. Five minutes from the middle of town and you can be in some of the prettiest countryside you'll ever see; three minutes will take you to the river that meanders through the lower part of town. Our Main Street curves to cross the river, becoming at that point South Valley Road. Almost everybody here is known to us, even if some but vaguely, since newcomers, other than tourists, are a rarity.

"A shotgun makes quite a noise," the chief said. He was walking about the room looking thoughtful. "Your bridge night, Emma. Three tables you say. That means twelve people here who didn't hear anything. Downstairs are Earl, Polly, and Ron, and a customer or two. Nobody sees or hears anything." He eyed us skeptically; he couldn't let it go.

"Who'd hear anything with that thunder crashing about?" Earl said.

The chief was going over again all that we had already told him before he'd had the body removed. He'd asked us all to wait until he came back from viewing the body of Harry Bagley on the vacant lot. We'd watched from the upstairs window, seeing Doc Entwistle moving around in the glare of the chief's headlights.

"The ladies left at around eleven. You three," he turned to where Rose Markam, Mary Possit, and Thelma Lindley, the school-teacher, sat. Rose and Mary both work at the bank. Three solid types, understandably now a bit upset. "You three cut across the vacant lot. The others went down Main Street."

"Yes, chief," Thelma said. "Mary, Rose, and I all live on the Terrace, just off Meadow Lane. A shortcut. Even though the lot was muddy the concrete drive that belonged to the old house is still there. About halfway over we came on the body sprawled just near those lilac bushes. At first we thought, since it was Harry, that he was drunk. We decided that we'd have to call you so that you could—I mean, we couldn't just ignore him lying there. He was sopping wet. We hesitated whether or not to go back to Earl's place

or telephone when we got home. And then we saw his face." She shuddered. "We got back here as fast as we could."

They had come hurrying back, ringing the bell at our downstairs door. Earl had gone down, saying, "Now who's forgot what this time?" They'd gasped out the shocking news.

"Bagley," Earl had said. "He'll be drunk, that's all. Anyway, go on upstairs while I nip over and take a look."

Earl had come back white-faced, shaking. "That horse he was riding earlier and abusing something shameful has finally finished Bagley off," he said. "Threw him and kicked him in the face." Chief Leonard Hurley had joined us but minutes after Earl had put through a call. Dr. Entwistle, also the coroner, had reported that a shotgun blast, rather than the horse, was responsible for Harry's death.

"How'd you know it was Harry?" the chief asked. "I mean the way his face—"

"I don't know, really," Rose said, hurrying to reply lest the chief be moved to describe what Harry's face had been reduced to. "Clothes, I suppose. We've been used to seeing him around for a long time. There was no sign of the horse."

"It would head for home once Harry let go of the bridle rein." He took down the names of all who had been at the bridge party and prepared to leave. "If any of you come up with something you forgot to tell me, be sure to get in touch. We'll talk some more later." He headed for the stairway, Earl following to let him out. "Thanks for the coffee, Emma. Good night, Polly. Oh, wait. You ladies will have to take the long way home after all. If you care to come now, I'll drive you over to the Terrace. Don't want anybody going walking over the lot until we've had a good look at it in the daylight."

Thelma, Rose, and Mary accepted the offer with alacrity. And Earl, Polly, and I were left to tidy up. Bed, for the time being, seemed out of the question. "I was tired as all get out when I first came upstairs," Earl said. "Now I doubt if I could get to sleep for thinking about this."

We sat at the kitchen table going over what had happened, trying to come up with answers as to who and why.

"Who'd go to such lengths?" Polly said. "Good for nothing as Harry is—was—folks in Longvalley aren't the vindictive kind. Not that the most of us wouldn't have gladly removed Harry if there'd been some way."

"He wasn't overdone with friends," Earl agreed. He was attack-

ing a plate of leftover sandwiches. "Outside of Nora I can't think of anybody who even moderately tolerated him. Always thought that one day he'd go too far, a beating maybe, but hardly this."

"What about Nora?" I said. "She's got to be told."

"The chief was driving out to the farm right after he left us," Earl said. "Nora, she'll be wondering—but no, this isn't the first time that horse has galloped home without Harry, him lying in a ditch until he sobered up enough to walk."

"Why such a sweet person as Nora Fitzmaurice married Bagley is past any understanding," Polly said. "This past year for her must have been hell."

Nora, although Bagley's wife for the past year, was still referred to as Nora Fitzmaurice. Everyone in Longvalley had been astounded when Nora had married Bagley so soon after Charlie Fitzmaurice died.

"Bamboozled into it by that rascal," Earl said. "Trusting little woman, thinking all men were like her dad, or Charlie. That's where she was wrong."

I sat thinking about Nora. She hadn't been to town much after marrying Harry. About a month ago she'd come into the shop. I'd been shocked at her appearance. Her once shining blonde hair had straggled about her neck in rattailing strands. The cream and roses complexion had looked old. And behind her dark glasses, as she'd raised them briefly, I saw that her lovely blue eyes were sunken and ringed about with purple bruises fading to yellowish grey. I'd mumbled something about why didn't she stay for lunch, as I'd be going upstairs in a matter of minutes. And Earl, tactless as usual, said, "Right, Nora, stay for lunch. Looks to me like you ain't been eating right." She had smiled then, for a brief second looking like the lovely Nora we'd always known.

Her voice hadn't been the same either, low pitched now, and hoarse. And then, as she waited for Earl to box her purchases, she'd said to me, in an intense whisper: "Emma, did you know that Reggie Crossland's back from Australia?" Her voice and manner had taken me by surprise, for a glimpse of the old, vibrant Nora had shone through. It was after she'd gone that I thought about how close she and Reggie had once been. But it was only a momentary thought at the back of my mind.

"These sandwiches are good," Polly was saying. She and Earl, the plate between them, settled into the pleasant task of finishing them.

Nora and Reggie Crossland. Was it eighteen or twenty years ago? Both of them eighteen then. Sweethearts they'd been, crazy about each other, it had been easy to see. And I remembered "crazy" was the word Nora's father had used when he'd put his foot down at their wanting to become engaged. "That crazy Reggie Crossland. I'll not have him for a son-in-law." He'd succeeded in separating them by sending Nora off to nursing school. The war coming right about then had helped, I suppose, for Reggie was among the first to join up.

"I'll wait," Nora had told me, grimly. "We'll marry, Emma, you just wait and see. But I'm not going to sit about mooning in my father's house. He doesn't really want me to go away to be a nurse. But it's what I'm going to be. Then when Reggie comes back and becomes a teacher, I'll have a profession, too."

Nora was not only very beautiful, she was spunky as well. I could see why Reggie was so taken. Sure, he loved to look at her, who wouldn't? But it was a sort of lively fire she had that made her especially attractive. As for Reggie's becoming a teacher, which his dad, Lionel Crossland, was, that was not at all what Reggie had in mind. He'd be a vet, he said, or a farmer. And that was where he ran afoul of his father, a clash of strong wills.

Lionel Crossland was the best school principal Longvalley has ever had, a rather fierce looking, redhaired man immaculately turned out. Hair brilliantined, mustache waxed, and so neat. Grey suits ranging from charcoal shade to highest grey, with a bandbox look. Mattie and Lionel Crossland had had their troubles with Reggie. Not that the boy was bad; far from it. It was the fights he got into mostly, and being hauled off to the police constabulary for a talking to by the chief. They found it degrading. At least Lionel did. Mattie Crossland had a more philosophical attitude. Except for the red hair Reggie took after Mattie, both of them having a lovely sense of humor. You couldn't blame Lionel, really, for he did have a standard to maintain in the school. His shining red face seemed to get redder after every one of Reggie's escapades.

Reggie, both Earl and I liked him a lot; he was our box boy at the time he and Nora were going to high school and right up to the time he left for the war. A goodnatured, curly-haired redhead young giant he was. Forget-me-not blue eyes twinkled with the devil's own mischief. His flashing grin was, he said, "To show my beautiful false teeth. Something I have to do for my old man. All that orthodontal work he paid for. I sure wouldn't have had them

if it hadn't been for my father. He wanted me perfect, you see." Of course they were no more false teeth than were Nora's gleaming white ones that made her smile something to see. Three boys we'd had need of to do the work after Reggie went away.

But Reggie could get into trouble without even trying, for he was a bit wild, that is, by some people's standards. There was the motor bike he bought. Tearing about town with that thing banging and roaring all hours of the night—Nora riding pillion, of course—didn't do a thing for his popularity. Then there were the fights; but every incident was the outcome of one of Reggie's good deeds: restraining a wife or dog beater, quite aggressively in some cases, for Reggie never had assessed his own strength; sailing into a group of rowdies tormenting a girl. There were the many pranks, too, some with disastrous results. "That Reggie Crossland fighting again," you'd hear. The constable going for Reggie, seldom for the provocative source. Reggie suffering further in the inevitable row with his father.

When the bike folded, literally, on impact with a tree as Reggie pushed it to ninety on a stretch of open highway, miraculously with but minor damage to himself, he put fifty dollars of his hard earned money into an old jalopy, which, with the aid of stalwart friends, he parked in our back yard and in off hours took completely apart. "We can be thankful," Earl said, staring at the wreckage strewn about the yard, "that he'll not injure himself or anyone else driving that. For never is he going to get that lot together again."

But in a short time Reggie had it chugging rhythmically and, after equipping it with a Klaxon horn, he drove all hours of the night through the quiet town. Two A.M. he'd chug past our front, the Klaxon tootling, "Pom-pom-poom-pah." I'd turn over in bed and laugh. Earl, he'd sit up and yell: "I'll fire that kid first thing in the morning." He never did, for if there was one person who loved Reggie—that is, apart from his parents, yes, both of them, and Nora—it was Earl.

Then came Hitler, and the war. And Reggie went "over there." The atmosphere of Longvalley changed overnight: our town was suddenly a peaceful place, and sad. Only then did many recall the helpful hand of Reggie Crossland in day to day affairs. Along with Nora, Earl and I wept.

The jalopy stood forlorn in our back yard, for Lionel Crossland wouldn't allow it on their premises. Once in a while I went out and sat in it. Nora came over and sat in it, too. And no doubt wherever

Reggie was his ears were burning hot. He wrote long letters to us, telling us to how to run the market. "He'll be putting the generals straight as to how that war will best be won," Earl said. He'd met an Australian fellow, Reggie said: "A real guy. Arthur Train his name is. He's a lot like me. When this war's over I'm going sheep farming with him in Australia. My dad won't like it, but then I've always told him I'll never, never be a teacher. I think he'll not mind too much if I make lots of money, which Arthur and I surely will."

Earl laughed. "Two of 'em, mind you, Em, over there cooking up the mischief. War's good as over right now. That Hitler feller might just as well pack it up."

The war over, Reggie did not come back. Nor did he come to very much harm, He and the Australian went sheep farming together in Australia. "Wait for me," he wrote Nora. "I shall have enough money soon to set up my own farm back there." But Nora, a nurse by then, hearing that Reggie had no intention of coming back for three years, feeling sure that someone else had claimed him, did not wait. Her father saw to that. She married Charlie Fitzmaurice. And ten years went by, happily as it turned out, for Nora.

After completing her nursing course, Nora had worked in a hospital for a short while, then had come back to Longvalley. Her first private case being the care of Mrs. Fitzmaurice, Charlie's mother, she ailing for some time. The Fitzmaurice farm is about a mile outside town along the North Road; its pastures and meadow lands run to the wide river at the foot of the town.

Mrs. Fitzmaurice had taken to Nora from the start. As for Charlie, he'd fallen in love with her right away. They were married that fall, he fifteen years older than she. It was Nora herself who told me: "Emma, he's a kind and wonderful man. I truly love him. It's impossible not to. If you're wondering about Reggie, well, I've accepted the fact that by now there is someone else for him. Why not? So long as he's happy that's all I should really wish for him." I had thought I detected a wistful note; but perhaps I read into her voice something that was not there, only the vague disappointment in my own mind. And happy we were for Nora, for no better marriage could have been arranged. The Fitzmaurices were well off, and a good, steady family, too. Charlie and Nora had ten very special years, a rare devotion between the two, for there were no children of the union. And a delight and comfort to the old lady Nora had been, those two years before she died.

Then Charlie Fitzmaurice had a heart attack, leaving Nora floundering, alone on the farm except for Rory O'Brien, the hired man. We'd had no real knowledge of the lonely grief that Nora endured, she with no way to fill the void, for she and Charlie had come upon that kind of peace together that few people find. So Nora had married Bagley thinking, mistakenly, that for her he'd changed his ways; that the two of them could aid each other, for Harry had straightened himself out surprisingly for six consecutive months. A goodlooking fellow, no doubt about that, and but three years older than Nora. And he could turn on the charm when he'd a mind to. Sneaky Harry was past master at that. Making a play for Nora, knowing her loneliness, he'd been available constantly in a useful capacity on the farm, impressing her as he meant to. It was all greed on his part, for he was bent on securing the Fitzmaurice farm and any fortune that Charlie had left. We all knew that what Charlie and his mother had was considerable. And Nora no longer had her dad to advise her.

Nora married him in spite of pleas and warnings. And almost at once found out what that rascal was after. Rory told in town about the beatings when Nora refused him the money he demanded, about the liquor he had hid in the barn. Prize stock Harry sold without Nora's knowledge, as well as fine and valuable antiques from the house. A heartbreaking year she had endured with him.

If only Charlie Fitzmaurice hadn't died! If only Reggie hadn't gone away. If only—no, not a bit of use wishing. But this past year has been a sad one in Longvalley, for we're not indifferent to the suffering of neighbors and friends. And one could hardly think of Charlie without thinking also of George Banner. George with but months to live, dying of cancer, Charlie's lifelong friend, and our vet for years. The best in his work, and a fine, kind man besides. And all along there was wastrel Harry Bagley flourishing like the green bay tree. I wouldn't be exaggerating if I said that, to a man, the people of our community would have wasted no time, had it been possible, in reversing roles for George and Harry. Outspoken they were on the subject, thinking of George.

Rachel Banner's farm is across the river from the Fitzmaurice place, the two farms backing on each other. The Fitzmaurice place fronts on North Road, the Banner farm faces South Valley Road. We never think of one without the other, for Charlie Fitzmaurice and George Banner grew up together, close friends since they

played together as boys. Rachel Banner had farmed her place for years with her son George, he also having had the veterinary practice for a good number of years. The terrible thing happening to George took us back to what his mother had been through. Widowed young, with three children to raise, faced with the prospect of losing the farm, Rachel had battled on with only the help of a youthful hired hand, and eventually what her own two boys could do. The farm prospered, but when trouble should have been letting up, Rachel's younger son Alvin ran away after getting Elsie Parker into trouble. Elsie's parents, overly religious, and poor, put Elsie out of their home with no place to go. It had been Rachel who took Elsie in and cared for her and the baby. Then, Rachel's own daughter, Penny, had an affair with a married man, causing the breakup of his marriage. The two of them had left Longvalley. Elsie's eventual departure with the child, a boy she'd called Hiram, was a new grief for Rachel, so attached had she become to both.

"I have to let them go, of course," Rachel said. "Elsie's marrying a good man." He was a butcher in a town some distance away. I don't recall how Elsie met him, but I think he'd come to the farm buying spring lambs on different occasions. The years set Rachel and Elsie apart, but Christmas always brought a letter and pictures showing how well Hiram was doing with his new brothers and sisters. Still, it was in George that Rachel felt vindicated, he compensating for the way Alvin and Penny had turned out. (But for all that she'd have welcomed them back without reservations.)

The amazing thing was that now Harry was dead and George was up and at work, still enjoying his evening horseback rides about the farm. No taking to bed for him. George's surprising resilience was bolstered, of course, by Rachel's good care of him; she gained time for him. If George had a passion for any one thing it was horses. For years he had bred and raised them. To see George seated on one of his fine animals was to see man and beast at their best together. A joy it was, like the best poetry. Try as I might I couldn't banish the sensation of awe that the mood of the community had been taken note of by a higher authority.

Even so, the one really good thing of the year, for I knew, of course, that we wouldn't have George for long, was that Reggie Crossland came back from Australia. And now he was in the throes of setting up his own sheep farm where the rocky ridges slope-up gradually from the valley to Stoney Mountain.

The last crumb cleaned off the plate of sandwiches between them,

Earl and Polly decided it was time for bed. "Busy day tomorrow," Earl said. Turning into her room Polly said: "They come in threes, you know, deaths." I've often thought that if any one person typified the mood of Longvalley it was Polly. On that sepulchral note we sought sleep.

The news that Nora was being accused of shooting her husband hit us Saturday morning. Beamer Ross was doing the broadcasting in our market, because that's where he knew he'd find the crowd. And crowd it was, since those who'd been homebound Friday night because of the storm were there with the usual Saturday shoppers. Earl, Polly, and Ron were busy. I helped when no one needed post office business. I close the post office at noon Saturdays.

"I seen her right there at the back of the hotel parking lot, among the trees," Beamer said. "She'd the gun smoking in her hand. And Harry was there laying shot, dead on the ground. I'd had to come out to—well, I'd had quite a few beers. Tom had bounced Harry a few minutes before. A right nasty mood Harry was in. Just starting to rain it was, thundering and lightning something fierce."

"Mind your big mouth, Beamer," Earl said. "Harry wasn't shot on the hotel parking lot. Across the street from here on the vacant lot is where it happened. You told the chief this tale about the parking lot?"

"Damn right I told him. Down there he is right now checking things out. Across here on the vacant lot, you say. No way. Plain as day I see Nora back in them trees at the hotel parking lot. There's a flash and I see Harry go down, see him lying there on the ground. The horse, he'd a hold of it by the bridle rein. He'd been trying to mount, but that horse it kept on jumping sideways because Harry'd up with his foot to it. A right nasty mood he was in, which was why Tom had had to bounce him."

"And you ran over to put him up on the horse, I suppose?" Polly gritted. "Shot dead like he was. And the horse galloped up here and threw him on the vacant lot across the street."

"Not me! I runs back into the bar to tell the lads what's happened. They come out with me to see. And that's what I don't understand." Beamer looked about wildly. "Harry ain't there. Him and the horse is both gone. I tell you, last night some devilish power was let loose. And somebody tell me, who else'd have reason for murdering Harry?"

"Beamer, last night you'd had a few too many, that's all," Ray

Marston, a worker at the lumber mill, said. "Couldn't mount, you say. So right he couldn't. Me and my wife saw him and the horse come out of the hotel parking lot. Going up Main Street Harry was at about nine thirty, just as the rain started. We'd been visiting Amy's folks. All the way up Main Street Harry is trying to mount, hanging onto that poor horse, yelling and scaring it, it prancing sideways. Time and again he fell down, but hung onto the bridle rein. I'd a bit of a job to start my car, and when I finally got in I took a look up the street to see how Harry was making out. He was about level here with Earl and Emma's place, still not mounted. 'That horse'll walk him home,' I says to Amy, 'when it ain't dragging him.' We drove off going south. And that's the last we saw of him."

Jack Stevens, a farmer, told the same story, as did Reed Scott, a plumber who lives at the north end of town. In both cases the time they quoted was "nine thirtyish," just as it was coming on to rain. "Hurrying to get home before the worst of the storm hit," Reed said. "Yep, I passed Harry and the horse, them heading north on Main Street."

So that no one gave much credence to Beamer's story, not even the chief, he well aware of Beamer's tendency to the fabrication of wild tales. But, of course, he had had to check Beamer's story out. Heavy rain had washed the sandy soil along the down slope of the Hotel parking lot, obliterating any footprints. If shotgun shells had been ejected, they were nowhere to be found. Furthermore, three men who had been in the bar at the time Beamer had rushed back in testified that they had gone out to see. There had been no sign of Harry or the horse, nor had any of them seen anyone in the trees at the back of the parking lot. The story that Beamer had told them, they said, was that the horse had reared and knocked Harry to the ground, finishing him off right there. Only when the news reported Harry dead by shotgun blast did Beamer say that he had seen Nora with the gun. But he did stick to his story of seeing Nora at the back of the parking lot among the trees, not far from the river.

"Just to get noticed that guy will tell a tale like that," Earl said.

Various rumors flew about all of that Saturday, Sunday too. And then came Nora's admitting to having been at the back of the parking lot at the time in question. "I was there," she said. "But I did not kill Harry. I'd gone to get my horse when the thunder and lightning broke. I knew that Harry would have her tied to a

tree. She'd panic. I couldn't stand it, just sitting there knowing the way he treated that fine mare. I'd begged him not to ride her. He did it just to spite me. I ran by the river path, both going there and coming home. Yes, I have a shotgun, a double-barrelled one that used to belong to Charlie. Right now I don't know where it is. I did not have it when I went to the hotel parking lot. I saw Harry and the mare leave the lot and turn north onto Main Street."

Whether Chief Hurley believed what Nora told him we didn't know. Nora didn't know either, for she herself, coming in for groceries, told us about that. I have to say that she looked a totally different Nora from the one I'd seen a few weeks back: stronger and more confident, very thin and drawn it's true, but with eyes sort of fierce, and mouth grim. Yet who else but Nora could possibly have a motive for killing Harry? I didn't say that to anybody, but I knew that Earl was thinking the same thing when he said, coming back from taking the groceries out to her truck, "A miracle she'll need to get clear of this mess."

I'd offered to stay nights with Nora. She'd thanked me and said: "I'm okay, Emma, better able now to think than I've been for months."

Nora's story was that she had been in the kitchen when she heard the horse come galloping into the yard. The bridle rein was hanging in front of it and the riding saddle had slipped a little sideways. Because Rory, the hired man, was off for the evening, she had put the horse in the stable and had rubbed it down. It was her own mare that Charlie Fitzmaurice had given her for an anniversary that Charlie's friend George Banner had bred and raised.

"Didn't you worry about where your husband might be, Nora?" the chief had asked.

"I'd no doubt as to where he'd be, Chief Hurley," Nora said. "He'd be walking home, or trying to, anyway. And I knew that when he did get home there'd be a beating for me. I hoped that the rain would help sober him up. He was drunk even before he set off for the hotel. He'd been buying liquor and keeping it hid in the barn. He was more violent that night than he'd ever been. It was only because he was so smashed and couldn't catch me that I escaped a beating earlier. And because he couldn't beat me he tore up the kitchen and killed my little dog."

When that piece of news filtered through to us I felt truly sick.

"Killed her little dog! Oh, Earl! That was the last gift that Charlie gave her, for her birthday, but months before he died. That sweet

little white poodle she called Persha." And for Nora it would have been so much more than the death of her little white dog. Motive? A whole pile of motives was going to have to be sifted through.

"I've a nasty feeling," Earl said, looking grim, "that we're not going to like the outcome."

The chief, stopping by, had told us that some high-ranking detectives were coming to take the case out of his hands. "They'll be talking to you," he said. "Just tell them everything the way you told it to me." I felt cold inside, for Nora. Monday morning Inspector Hardman and Sergeant Wilshire arrived.

And Monday morning it was that Reggie Crossland came from his farm into town. After a visit and lunch with his parents he came into our shop to stock up on groceries, heading then for the farm. Earl had a great many questions about the farm that Reggie was stocking, at present, with sheep.

"First rate place for sheep, Earl," Reggie said. "Oh, yeah, I'll have some dairy cattle by and by; I've some fine lowland pasture. Then I won't have to pay this price for a piece of cheese that some folks are charging. I've but two milking cows as it is."

"Sheep farming, dairy farming! You all alone! You could lose your shirt. You'd a lot of good ideas when you worked here as a lad; always thought you'd come up with something smart."

"Smartest lad you ever had, Earl. I'm glad to see you took my advice and put wheels on those bins." There was the same roguish grin, the devilish twinkle in the blue eyes. But the red curls now had a considerable sprinkle of grey. Tough muscled he was now, and lean, brown as a nut, too. But there was a hardness also that I had never thought to see in Reggie's eyes.

"Smart-assed you mean," Earl chided. "But yes, best worker I ever had. Not that we aren't pleased with Ron. He's a darn good lad. Now, if you'd said beef cattle—"

And as I attended to customers at the post office I heard them at it just like old times. And then Earl was saying: "You'll find out what a pound of cheese costs before you're much older. But there's something you've not got on that farm that you're going to need!"

"What's that?"

"A wife. I'm hoping you've someone in mind, or are you thinking your ma'll go out there to cook for you?"

"Ma? Heck, no. She's got more than enough to do. Give me time, Earl. After all, I'm not long back."

"How much time d'you need? You're middle-aged as it is."

Reggie made a deprecatory noise. "Just coming into my prime."

They went on talking, selecting and packing items into several boxes. There'll be no difficulty about the wife, I thought. Already female eyes were turning Reggie's way. There was an air of maturity about him now that made him even more attractive than the youthful Reggie had been. That morning was the first time Reggie had heard of how Harry Bagley had died. He and Earl turned to that topic.

"That's the night I drove out to my farm. I'd intended coming in then for the groceries but never did get the time. Knew I'd have to come in again anyway. I don't have the phone, or TV. I do have a radio in the truck, but didn't hear any mention on the news. Friday night, yeah, that's the night I ran out of gas in that storm, would you believe it! I'd had a million things to attend to. Knew right well I was low on gas and then clean forgot. Ma had wanted me to stay over, but I'd my two cows needing milking, pigs to feed, hens to shut up so the foxes wouldn't get 'em. And I'd my two dogs closed up in the house."

About an hour after Reggie left the shop, word came that George Banner had been taken to the hospital following a stroke Friday night. The gloom thickened. In my post office cubbyhole I sat thinking about George. Polly came downstairs, putting her head around my door. "I've put yours and Earl's tea ready upstairs," she said. "I'll buzz if anyone needs the post office or if the shop gets busy." We've a code: one buzz for Earl, two for me or Polly. But Monday is usually our quietest day.

I could see that Polly had been crying, and I remembered that years ago she and George had walked out together. Polly never had said why they split up but I had suspected, well, it was rather more than a suspicion, that George had been in love with Nora. For Nora, it had been only a tentative attraction before she'd gone to care for Mrs. Fitzmaurice. After that there had been Charlie. Polly hadn't been able to continue the association. Strong Polly is, with her own ideas of what's right. They'd stayed good friends. I'd long felt that Polly should have made herself more available socially. She tends not to get noticed, so fine a person. She and some good man are missing out. I put up another prayer for Polly.

Earl and I sat upstairs with our tea. "As Polly says," Earl murmured, a bit shakily, "three times it is."

"George isn't—Doc Entwistle says his vital signs are good, that he'll come out of it. Who else would have held up as George has?"

"The way things are I can't see—" Earl's voice trailed off into a deep sigh. "You know, she could have gone up Meadow Lane, since it runs out of the hotel parking lot, while Harry and the horse went up Main Street. They'd have come face to face at the vacant lot. And if Nora did have the gun like Beamer says, well, from there she could have gone home with the horse and not a soul would see her. Hardman's going to think that."

The chief was talking to Polly when we went downstairs. I thought he seemed, well, different. I couldn't have said why. For a bachelor he keeps himself looking neat.

"Just passing, Emma, Earl." He made to leave. "Oh, my pipe tobacco, Polly."

"Chief's upset?" Earl asked, looking at Polly after the door had closed. "He say anything new?"

"He's not on the murder case, you know." Polly went back to the weighing of sugar into five pound bags. "Dropped in for his pipe tobacco like you saw. Upset, like the rest of us."

I was relieved that Polly, no longer tearful, was her brisk self again. Worth her weight in gold; we would have had a hard time without her.

Inspector Hardman came to visit us that afternoon. A goodlooking man, in a cold sort of way. Not unpleasant, but his very direct questions demanded clear answers. The chief had briefed him, of course. We watched after he left the shop, saw him drive the short distance up Main Street and turn right onto North Road, going out to the Fitzmaurice farm. Our hearts were lead weighted. He'd not be long finding out the truth of whatever it was that Nora had done.

Rory O'Brien told of seeing the gun as late as Friday morning on its rack above the chest in the Fitzmaurice farmhouse living room. Now it had vanished. Rory recalled the days when he'd seen Charlie Fitzmaurice teaching Nora to use it. "With Harry," Rory said, "it was different. He was scared of firearms. Only thing he'd have been likely to do with it was to sneak it off and sell it."

As the days passed, Beamer's story gained in credibility. A long week we endured, but finally arrived at Friday. And then a third bombshell hit. Inspector Hardman had come into the shop to verify with us some of the things that Nora had told him. He was about to leave when the shop doorbell tinkled and in breezed Bill Worseley. Every Friday Bill comes in for a mountain of groceries. The Worseleys are Reggie Crossland's nearest neighbors in the Rocky

Mountain area, even though they are miles apart. Annie, Bill's wife, comes into town but once a year. She makes a day of it, visiting her cousin Maude a few streets to the north of us.

Bill, a boisterous sort of guy, but goodnatured for all that, can be heard all over any room without anybody even trying to listen. "I'll leave you Annie's list, Earl," he bellowed. "I'll be back in a couple of hours or so. I've to run out to the lumber mill for some two-by-fours. Some paint and wallpaper I'm to get as well. Annie's telling me I have to do the upstairs rooms over. I never have seen anything like the work she can dredge up for me."

"Seems to me you keep her mighty busy, too, Bill. All them kids you got," Earl said.

Bill's laughter stirred the dust on our top shelves. "I'm a lucky man," he boomed. "My Annie's the best there is. Mind you put in all that stuff she ordered or my name'll be mud. Yours, too. Say, this is a hell of a business over Harry being shot. Who'd have thought that right at the very time I was driving past this here corner and out past the Fitzmaurice place last Friday night—"

"Bill." Earl, seeing the inspector's sudden interest, had hurriedly laid a hand on Bill's arm. "Bill, I don't believe you've met Inspector Hardman. He's working on that job right now."

"No sir, we ain't met," Bill said. "Howdy do." Bill held out a work-roughened spade of a hand, the grip of which the inspector would remember. His bright brown eyes examined Hardman. He was going to have to give Annie full details of this. A real, top-ranking police guy if that smart suit was any guide. Yes, he'd have to tell Annie how he'd shaken the hand of a top-ranking chap from headquarters. A guy who could tell you a thing or two about murders and such.

"Last Friday night, Mr. Worseley, at around nine thirty you drove by that vacant lot out there, and along North Road past the Fitzmaurice farm. Am I right?"

"Well, more like ten o'clock I'd say, for that rain was really beltin' down. Real late I was, for I'd had considerable trouble with the truck. I'd had a blowout as well as engine trouble, been in the garage for a couple of hours. I'd picked up the groceries here at about eight and then went up to Annie's cousin's place for a bite to eat and I had four dozen eggs to take her. She'd given up on me by the time I got there. And then, sitting there gabbing with Maude and Ben, well, it was getting pretty late. 'Annie'll kill me,' I sez. 'I better hit the road.' Maude's kitchen clock said ten. It was pouring

like hell when I turned onto the North Road." Bill did plenty of arm-waving to indicate his itinerary.

"So twice you went by the vacant lot last Friday night," Hardman said. "Once at around eight o'clock and again at possibly five after ten?"

"I'd say that's about it."

"On that North Road, do you recall seeing anyone? Anything unusual?"

Bill scratched his face. "No, can't say as I can. Not a night that folks would be out if they didn't have to. Nothin' unusual except for somebody who'd run out of gas. I stopped to see if he needed help, but he'd just come from a nearby farm with a gallon can and was okay. Just drove on after that. Nothin' unusual except for me being late like I never was before."

"The man who had run out of gas, did you know him?"

"Oh, yeah. The teacher's lad. Reggie Crossland. He's just bought a farm next to me. He'd been into town on lawyer business and to gab with his folks, he said, and was headed back to the farm. He'd get his tank filled at the crossroads when he got over to the valley."

"From a farm you said he came with a gallon can of gas. Which farm was that, Mr. Worseley?"

I felt my throat get dry, and shivers ran down my back. Glancing at Earl I saw the consternation on his face. Apart from Earl and me, the inspector and Bill were the only other people in the shop. Polly had gone upstairs to make the ten o'clock tea. The whole atmosphere of the shop was suddenly charged and tense.

"The Fitzmaurice farm," Bill said, blithely. "Nearest one to the road at that point. I was but a mile out of town on the North Road. Their place, it's but a bit back off the road. I could see lights on in the yard."

The doorbell tinkled again as Bill strode out. I felt drained. Earl was leaning heavily against the counter. "Inspector, I did tell the chief about all the customers we'd had last Friday. I'd thought Bill was headed for home when he went out of here at around eight o'clock."

"So had we," the inspector said. "Eight o'clock hadn't seemed to fit in with what we needed. I'd appreciate it if you'd not mention what you just heard."

"Oh, no way," Earl said, not without feeling. "Of course not," I said. My throat had a swollen sensation.

We watched as Inspector Hardman turned his car once again

onto the North Road, this time heading for Reggie's farm. "This Friday, too," I said, "we're not going to forget."

That afternoon Reggie Crossland was arrested for the murder of Harry Bagley. The clincher had been Inspector Hardman's finding Nora's shotgun in Reggie's house. In a kitchen cupboard it was, the kitchen being the only room in the house that was furnished in any way, that is, with a stove, a table, and a cot bed. Reggie admitted that the gun was—or had been—Nora's. He had bought it from her, he said, that same night that he went to get the gallon can of gas for his truck. He had need of a shotgun, he said, for the rabbits were overrunning his farm. He drove himself in, Inspector Hardman driving behind Reggie's blue truck. But because Reggie now had many animals needing his care on the farm he was let out at once on bail.

That night, after the shop was closed, Earl, Polly, and I sat talking about Reggie and Nora, about the days when they had been so young and carefree, riding about Longvalley in the old jalopy, tootling the lighthearted notes on the Klaxon horn.

"Two young people really in love they were," Polly said. "If it hadn't been for that wretched war they'd have married, and none of this would ever have happened. When they met again, the way it once had been for them, it all came back. And Reggie saw what Bagley had done to Nora. He took the gun and went out to find Bagley. That's how it looks to me anyway."

I thought back, and remembered Nora's voice, husky with emotion as she'd said: "Emma, did you know that Reggie Crossland's back?"

I couldn't get to sleep that night, nor could Earl. We tossed and turned, every now and then breaking into some exclamation about what had happened. At about four in the morning we both dozed off, exhausted, and neither of us heard the alarm go off at six. It was Polly coming in with coffee at seven that roused us.

"Didn't think you two had plans to sleep all day," she said, "seeing it's Saturday. Guess what?"

"At seven in the morning who needs riddles," Earl growled.

"Nora Fitzmaurice has confessed to shooting Bagley. Last night she went to the station and gave herself up. Ron, he's downstairs getting ready to open up. He rode to work with that young constable. The news reporter told him the same thing."

"Bloody hell!" Earl's cup banged into the saucer. "Those two!"

Now both of 'em's up to the neck, for a stinker like Bagley. Polly, you sure know how to start a day."

"She's out on bail," Polly went on, crashing up the window blinds. "There's a police matron staying with her on the farm. Mattie Crossland, she's gone out with Reggie to his place." Polly stood holding the door in her hand. "You ready for something else?"

"Why not, we're case hardened by now." Earl's coffee cup rattled as he set it on the bedside table. "Young Ron, don't tell me he's been up to something?"

"Not Ron, no. Remember Rachel's boy, Alvin, that girl Elsie he got into trouble, and Rachel took her in? Well, she's back with the child, a teenager he is now. They're staying with Rachel. Seems Elsie's divorced. And the boy, I'm told, is the living image of Alvin."

Polly's hesitant manner as she stood holding the door indicated that she wasn't finished. Nervously, Earl and I waited. Still Polly stood, staring over our heads out the windows.

"Something else you've got on your mind?" Earl ventured.

"Elsie, she'd be a good one for you to have in the market," Polly said slowly.

Earl and I looked at each other in surprise. "But, Polly," Earl said, "we've hardly—there's four of us already."

"Three, Earl. I'm getting married. The chief and me. He's been promoted. We'll be leaving Longvalley."

I've never known Polly to close a door so quietly. We hardly knew she'd gone.

That's the kind of day that Saturday was from the start.

"Two can't be charged with the same one murder, can they, Earl?" I asked. We'd gobbled breakfast and had joined Polly and Ron downstairs. What a good lad Ron is for us. I felt truly grateful for him. To be losing Polly, well, if you can imagine feeling glad and sad all at one time, and add to that my remembering how devout my prayer for Polly had been, you'll understand the turmoil I was in.

"Sure they can, if both have had a hand in it. But you know right well that Nora's saying she did it just to get Reggie off the hook. Don't forget that Reggie had the gun. Don't forget that Rory saw the gun early that Friday. Comes Reggie to the farm for gas and sees the state that Nora's in. Who's to say that Reggie didn't grab the gun and go looking for Harry? Reggie's in big trouble as I see it."

But the story that Nora now told had sinister impact, for, little as most of us wanted to believe Beamer Ross's tale, Nora's latest version coincided with that.

"Harry and I had had a terrible row," Nora said. "I'd forbidden him to take my horse. He'd been ruining her. I knew when that thunder and lightning got started that the horse would be panicked, tied up to a tree in the hotel parking lot. I went to get my horse back, and I took the gun because I meant to kill Harry. From where I was at the back of the parking lot I saw him come out of the bar. When he started tormenting the horse I fired, but missed. I ran up Meadow Lane as Harry and the horse went up Main Street. I was waiting for him by the lilac bushes as he crossed the vacant lot. That's when I killed him. I took the horse and went home."

"How did Reggie Crossland get your gun?" the inspector had asked.

"I'd just got home when Reggie came into the yard. He'd run out of gas. He came into the kitchen. We talked for a while. The gun was on the kitchen table. Reggie said he had need of just such a gun. I sold it to him along with a box of cartridges and the gas for his truck." That was Nora's story, and she was sticking to it.

Needless to say that Beamer Ross went about telling everybody, "I told you so. Seen her shoot him, I did, with my own eyes."

"You seen nothing of the sort, Beamer," one of Beamer's drinking pals told him. "We all went out, remember. And Harry wasn't there, neither was he dead, for others saw him going up Main Street. Gun flashes you say you saw. Malarkey! Lightning was what you saw."

And Reggie swore he had proof that Nora did not kill Harry. Her fingerprints on the gun? Why not? It had been her gun, she had handled it many times. He had not cleaned it in any way, had just set it down out of the way in his kitchen broom closet.

"Something's wrong with all of it," Earl said. "Nora and Reggie, those two are trying to protect each other. Each thinks the other did it. Now, to me that means that neither of 'em did it. If neither of them killed Harry, who did?"

And then all charges against Nora were dropped. And that was a shock, too, for it meant that now Reggie was surely suspect. He'd left Nora at the farm, taking the gun and cartridges. He was in a rage against Harry, seeing the condition that Nora was in, and upset by what she'd told him. Had the horse arrived back while he was there, or even before, Reggie could have deduced that Harry

was not too far away, making his way home on foot. And on the vacant lot Reggie, carrying the loaded gun, had found him. Speculation had Reggie guilty of the crime. Moreover, Inspector Hardman's findings appeared to bolster that.

What Inspector Hardman had found was that Nora had indeed been on the hotel parking lot, but without the gun, and that she had not gone home by way of Meadow Lane that runs parallel to Main Street. Her first story had been that she had gone to the parking lot by the river path, returning the same way. It was on that path that the inspector found Nora's footprints in damp soil where, beneath thickly leafed trees, they had not been washed away by the rain; impressions showing clearly Nora's shoeprints going both ways. Further, there were handprints where she had fallen.

Had Nora been carrying a gun, those handprints, so the detective thought, would not have been so clearly defined, fingers outstretched. Moreover, the gun had not been cleaned by Reggie or anyone and, although showing evidence of having been recently fired, it carried no trace whatsoever of the mud or soil where Nora had stumbled. Then, too, the spot where she had tripped gave proof that the fall had been on her return, the handprints pointing plainly the direction she'd been going. Nora, the inspector said, had not gone up Meadow Lane to meet and kill Harry as he entered the vacant lot from Main Street. She had returned home by the river path as she had said in her first story.

Then, overnight, came further incriminating evidence against Reggie. The two spent cartridges from Nora's shotgun were found in his rain slicker pocket. "Hidden away in a mountain shack," the newspaper had it; a cabin that Reggie had built on the mountain for his needs when tending sheep in that area. Simultaneously, in his farmhouse, the detectives discovered a bloodstained jacket. Things could not have looked blacker for Reggie.

All of this was followed by yet another confusing aspect. Through Doc Entwistle, who had had to report it, Inspector Hardman discovered that Reggie had been shot in the right arm. Shotgun pellets embedded there had caused an infection. So, who had shot Reggie? "I suppose I was careless with the gun," he said. On the same day that the sergeant found the spent cartridges in Reggie's pocket, Inspector Hardman found two further spent cartridges in Meadow Lane, these latter being totally unexplainable, for they did not fit Nora's gun. A close check proved that Harry's face had been full

of Number 6 shot from the latter two cartridges found in Meadow Lane, not the Number 5 shot in the ones fitting Nora's gun. The shot in Reggie's right arm was definitely from Nora's gun.

Inspector Hardman, sitting across from Reggie and Nora in the Fitzmaurice farm kitchen, looked grim. "I want the truth and I want it now," he said. "If neither of you killed Bagley, are you protecting someone? I shall get the truth, of course, and if either of you is withholding evidence it could go hard for you."

Reggie, right arm in a sling, told the story for both himself and Nora. "I got into the Fitzmaurice farmyard that stormy Friday night with my gallon can for gas," Reggie began. "There was a yard light on, but no lights were on in the house. I was afraid I'd have to rouse someone out of bed, and then I saw that the kitchen door was partly open. I pushed on the door and had stepped forward to enter, was about to shout, when a blast of shot hit me, getting the doorjamb mostly. I yelled, 'What the hell's going on?'

"And then there was Nora, flinging the gun down and screaming. But she could only weep and hold onto me. When I switched on the kitchen light I saw the state the room was in: things overthrown, dishes smashed. And Nora's little white dog lay dead on the floor. Nora was sopping wet and mudstained.

"After a while, although Nora was still hysterical, she was telling me: 'I thought you were Harry. I was waiting for him. I was going to kill him for what he did tonight to little Persha, and to my horse that Charlie gave me.' That's what she was crying. And had it been Harry she wouldn't have killed him. She'd have missed him just as she missed me. I know she didn't kill Harry because there she was at home waiting for him. And when I left I took the gun with me. I said I wanted to buy the gun. Right enough I needed one for the rabbits, like I said.

"When Nora told me what Harry had done, and I saw that little dog and the way that kitchen looked, and the way Nora was, I said, 'I'll go and get that bastard. I'll give him the thrashing of his life.' I saw what he'd reduced Nora to. I wanted to get my hands on him. But Nora screamed at me: 'No. Reggie, no. Don't go near him. Tonight he's worse than he's ever been. The drink has finally driven him mad. He's completely out of control.'

"I ejected the two cartridges she'd fired and dropped them into my slicker pocket. Then together we buried that little dog. I went to the orchard and dug a hole where Nora said while she wrapped it in a bath towel. She sort of collapsed, weeping, on its grave. She

was in a shocking state, wet and muddy, and cold. I do believe if I could have got my hands on Eagley right then there wouldn't have been much left of him. I picked Nora up and carried her into the house. After she calmed down we both noticed that my arm was bleeding. I'd taken off the slicker, even then not realizing I'd been hit. I had felt a bit of a sting. Nora got out some of the shot and put iodine on the arm and bandaged it. I said I'd get it looked after. I tried doctoring it myself later when it began to fester.

"When I thought that Nora was all right I left, taking the gun with me. She was overwrought, and Harry, no telling what mood he'd be in, she might have another go at him. I didn't see Harry that night. I'd promised I'd not go back looking for him. I didn't know that Harry was dead until I came into town the following Monday. I'd a deal going through at the bank for the purchase of some farm machinery. Seems when Harry had been found shot Nora thought that I had gone back to find him. Up the mountain as I was most of that week, building my cabin, I heard no news at all. Evenings, I got the chores done and slept mostly."

Two mysterious cartridges. Someone had waited for Harry, or had met him crossing the lot, and had killed him, then had gone down Meadow Lane ejecting the spent cartridges. Someone other than Nora or Reggie had wanted Harry dead. But who? Well, that could be all the rest of us.

"The hand of God is in it. Charlie Fitzmaurice came back from the grave!" What had been whispers began to be boldly outspoken. Wishful thinking, I say, a way out when nothing logical works; something to mitigate the unbearable frustration. I couldn't shake the feeling that, collectively, we'd all had a hand in it.

Being released didn't free Reggie or Nora from suspicion. The grim shadow of doubt hung heavy, a black cloud. Two fine people whom we had watched grow from childhood, whom we all loved, should they come together at last were never to escape the burden of suspicion. Knowing their own innocence could provide no real peace as long as accusing eyes were turned on them. That's how Longvallians are, we have to have it in black and white. I couldn't get my heart up out of my boots. The detectives did not leave Longvalley. They had arrived back at the point of beginning all over again, with a trail gone cold. And that, we all sensed, should make them dig deeper, failure being unacceptable to them.

And then George Banner died. With his death the devastating truth was revealed. In wonderment we heard how it had happened.

That fateful Friday night, following his nightly routine, George had gone for a leisurely horseback ride. At Rachel's suggestion he'd taken his gun, hoping to get a rabbit or two. Rachel did make the best rabbit pie, George's favorite. Returning home as the storm rumbled overhead, George, unobserved among the trees on his own side of the river, saw Nora run towards the hotel parking lot, and also Bagley in the distance, in some sort of trouble with the horse, going off into Main Street. Nora, deeply disturbed, weeping and stumbling, had turned back through the trees and along the river path towards her home. "My poor Brownie. My little Persha, dead, murdered, murdered! Charlie! Charlie! Oh, God! Let me die to-night!"

On his horse George sat, his blood running cold at Nora's desperate sobbing. Still loving Nora and feeling in his very soul a duty to his lifelong friend Charlie, George put his horse to fording the river, heading into Meadow Lane. Totally without plan or purpose, merely seeking movement to work off the anger pounding in his head, hearing only Nora's voice, seeing only Nora's face and Charlie's.

At the top of the lane he drew rein, not quite knowing why he'd come there. No one was in sight. Lightheadedness seemed to lift him; he no longer felt earthbound. Outside of himself he floated skyward. Vaguely George realized that some untoward thing was reaching a climax inside him, knew that a final destiny was unfolding over which he had no control. Thunder crashed, lightning split the clouds and found its way into his head. It didn't matter; the pain he'd lived with was gone, numbness was developing. In his ears an ocean roared and pounded.

And in the shadowy distance there was Bagley, and the mare, entering the rubble-strewn lot from the Main Street side. Among the scattered masonry Harry stumbled and fell, losing his hold on the mare's bridle. A crack of thunder and the mare plunged, rearing, whinnying in terror, then, finding herself free, galloped off.

Without haste, as though other forces than his own had the ordering, George raised the gun and, as a sheet of lightning illuminated the area, he fired. There was stillness and darkness, and then the gentler sounds of rain. George's horse, sensing no restraint nor guidance on the bit, turned homeward. George, following the habit of years, with fingers that fumbled now, ejected the shells into the lane.

At the river's edge where the footbridge spanned the river,

deeper water, George let the gun go. It fell into the water with a barely audible splash and sank at once, soft black mud sucking it down, a quiet gurgle. The water's surface, briefly rippled and mud-dyed, had settled by the time George had crossed. He shuddered and slumped forward. Once home he had had to be carried into the house. He could neither walk nor talk.

"A stroke," Doc Entwistle said. "But vital signs are good. He'll come out of this."

Rachel was horrified. "He'd been feeling so good lately. I shouldn't have let him—he never should have gone riding."

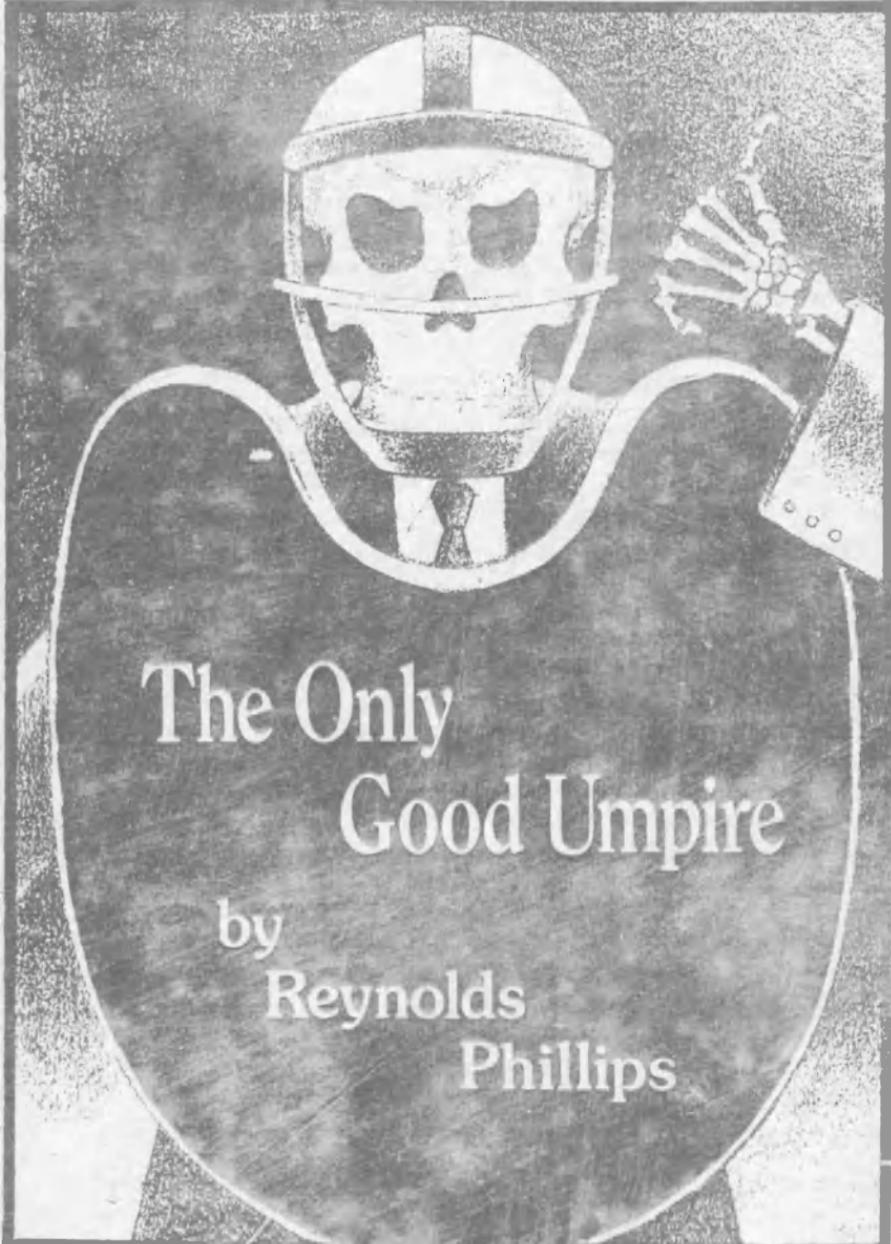
"Why the hell not?" Doc said. "I told him to do whatever he felt like doing."

Only with difficulty had George finally been able to tell Doc what had happened, not being quite sure that it had. Perhaps his realization of what had really happened came only then, for George suffered a second stroke, his overstrained heart giving way. His end had been peaceable. Rachel, who had suffered along with George's days of pain, felt calm, her own burden lifted. Of course, Entwistle had had to tell Hardman. But they never did find the gun.

The shockwave through Longvalley, though profound, was only briefly devastating. In awed tones Longvallians whispered: "We said all along that the hand of God was in it that night. Since the beginning of time hasn't He wrought his ordering through special people?" They thought that Charlie, through George, had been the instrument.

As for me, it made me shiver. Never before had I recognized the burden that the ancient ones had carried, the staggering responsibility of asking and of having been listened to.

Tonight, the first in a long time, my poor exhausted Earl is sleeping like a babe. From the window I can see over the moonlit valley. Beneath the lovely trees the river flows, silvered with starlight. So quiet the street outside. The storm, at last, is really over.



The Only
Good Umpire
by
Reynolds
Phillips

Illustration by George Thompson

ALFRED HITCHCOCK
mystery magazine March 1991

Golden Age Tower, home to more than a hundred fifty senior citizens, was a twelve-story fortress surrounded by an urban jungle. Out there were drugs, muggings, and assorted mayhem. Inside, all was serene. And Stella Burgess did her best to keep it that way.

Today, on her twice-weekly turn at the reception desk, Stella sat inside the glass-enclosed cage that occupied one wall of the Tower's small lobby. She sat erect and alert, like a guard on duty. The way she thought of it, that's what she was—guarding the entrance to the retirement community, making sure no stranger entered unchallenged.

As always when on duty, she was wearing her short blonde wig, the color her hair used to be half a century ago when she was generally considered the best catch among the high school teachers of Camelot, Oregon. Before she grew old and her hair turned thin and gray and scraggly.

She saw the two teenage boys before the sliding glass door opened automatically and admitted them to the lobby. One of them she knew by sight, and by first name. Joaquin Somebody.

Well, she thought, at least they've learned to come in the

front entrance. In the past she had lectured Joaquin on sneaking in the delivery entrance in the rear, which you could do without being seen by the person at the reception desk. She had lectured Golden Age management on this chink in the Tower's security armor, too, but thus far to no avail.

Joaquin and his friend started to walk past the glassed-in cubicle.

"Where do you think you're going?" Stella demanded. Once her voice had been pleasantly throaty, but now it was coarse and harsh and she hated it.

Joaquin grinned at her, dazzling white teeth in a Latin-brown face. "Hey, man. We just—

"I," Stella interrupted, "have lived eighty-one years, and not one of them as a man."

"Well, I jus' takin' my frien' Pablo up to see Joey Mazer's bizebull momentoes."

"Mementoos," said Stella. "Did Joey—Joseph—invite you?" It was disgusting when a man in his seventies wanted to be called Joey, as though he were still in grade school. And even worse when he filled his apartment with all that baseball junk.

"Joey say come any time. He say that when he umpire our game yesterday."

"Well, you just wait." She dialed Joey's number. His

apartment was down the hall from hers, and from his spinster sister Gertrude's, on the eleventh floor.

"Joey's dugout," he answered. "Joey speakin'."

Stella sighed, shaking her head. She quickly ascertained that Joaquin and friend did indeed have Joey's permission to come up and let him show off his baseball hall of fame.

She watched to make sure they went directly to the elevator. Not that she was prejudiced against Hispanics, or any minority for that matter. But after all, they weren't in school and they weren't working, like too many kids of all colors these days. Nothing better to do than waste their time playing ball on the public playground behind the Golden Age parking lot, and even going through the Tower's garbage before it was hauled off to the dump. At their age, she'd been drawing A's in high school and working evenings at the drygoods store.

In exactly fifteen minutes the boys emerged from the elevator, accompanied by Joey himself. Except for his face, thin and wrinkled and dominated by an aquiline nose, Joey looked as though he had stopped growing at the age of ten (where he probably *had* stopped emotionally, Stella thought). As he was fond of telling anyone who'd lis-

ten, his diminutive stature had prevented him from playing the game he loved and thus had driven him to attain considerable stature of a different sort—as a tonnotch baseball writer for several big-city newspapers.

When they walked past the desk, Joaquin grinned at Stella. "All that bizeball stuff up there—damn worth a lot. Specially the Beb Root bat."

"Babe Ruth," said Stella. She fixed her gaze on Joey, who was wearing his New York Yankees cap today, on backwards as usual. "Don't wander too far away, Joseph. You know it's not safe out there."

"Just going to do some um-pirin' for the boys," he assured her. Then, to his companions: "I remember Billy Martin said to me once, 'Joey,' he said, 'the only good umpire is a dead umpire.'"

As they went out the door, she heard Pablo say, "So mebbe you don't want do *too* good today, huh, Joey?"

Precisely at noon, Stella was replaced on the desk by Harriet Cutliffe. Back in her cozy eleventh-floor apartment, she went directly to the big window overlooking the parking lot and beyond it the playground with its baseball diamond. There was a ball game going on down there

all right. She spotted Joey instantly, crouched behind the catcher, wearing that outlandish red and blue Hawaiian shirt with the green buttons.

As she watched, Joey thrust his right hand into the air. The batter, his bat still on his shoulder, swung around and waved a fist in Joey's face. And over on the batter's side of the field, his teammates were shaking their fists and yelling. Probably screaming, thought Stella, "Kill the umpire!" In Spanish.

It was evidently the third out, for the teams began changing places. Stella shrugged and crossed her living room to the tiny kitchenette. Two white plastic bags filled with the week's trash and kitchen garbage leaned against the pantry door. She picked them up and carried them out of her apartment and down the hall to the little trash disposal room.

Pushing open the door to the five by five cubicle, she reached in and switched on the light, still thinking about an old man who lived in his past and ignored his present. Well, she reminded herself, Joey hadn't been entirely ignoring it lately. Not since that little flapper, Minerva Helgeson, had arrived on the scene.

As she lifted the two foot square metal door that provided access to the garbage

chute, she became aware of the voices. There were two of them. Both female. Both raised to a level several decibels above normal conversation. No normal conversation would have penetrated the wall separating the trash room from Joey Mazer's apartment.

Her garbage bag bumped and thumped along its eleven story free fall, landing with a *whomp* in the Dumpster to which all Golden Age garbage was consigned. The racket prevented her from trying to translate the voice sounds into words. Not that it mattered really, because she intended to learn the nature of that loud discourse anyway.

Seconds after leaving the trash room, she thrust her finger at the doorbell outside Joey's apartment. It seemed forever before the door opened, framing the face of Joey's sister Gertrude.

Gertrude's fleshy cheeks were even redder than normal, indicating that her blood pressure was riding high at the moment. Stella had always found it difficult to believe that Gertrude and Joey were really siblings, for Gertrude was, well, enormous—burly enough to pick up her brother and hoist him over her shoulder like a sack of Idaho potatoes.

"Well," said Gertrude, strug-

gling to arrange her features into a welcoming smile. "What a nice surprise. But if you're looking for Joey, which I assume you are, he isn't in just now."

"Of course he isn't. That's why I stopped by, Gertrude. When you weren't at your unit, I came on over here." Stella was a strictly honorable individual, but then a little white lie now and again never hurt anyone. "I thought maybe I'd find you here, doing Joey's morning dishes or something."

"What do you mean—that's why you stopped by?"

"Well, I thought perhaps you would want to know what Joey is getting himself involved in lately. Just take a look out your window. Here, let me show you." With that, Stella stepped uninvited through the doorway, though she had to turn sideways to get past Gertrude in the little entry hall.

In the middle of the living room stood Golden Age's Minerva Helgeson. Stella could still remember the flappers of the 1920's with their close-bobbed hair, dancing the Charleston in their short, tight skirts. That's what came to mind whenever she saw Minerva. Minerva's bobbed hair was jet black (dyed, of course). And Minerva was still rather cute, with large come-hither:

brown eyes, though Stella consoled herself with the knowledge that Minerva was a good ten years her junior. Minerva was also quite small, almost petite, just the right size for Joey Mazer.

Right now Minerva was smiling, though her eyes didn't seem to be participating. "Joey's down there umpiring a ball game, if that's what's bothering you," she said.

"Perhaps," responded Stella, "you haven't been here long enough to appreciate how hazardous it can be out there. Why, only last week poor Mrs. Crandall had her purse snatched while she was waiting for a bus right down at the corner."

She turned to Gertrude, who was now standing in the living room door, essentially filling it. "Gertrude, I wasn't sure you realized how much time Joseph's been spending down there with those street kids, and I know how protective you are of your brother."

"He needs protecting. He's really just a little boy himself in some respects." Gertrude waved a pudgy hand in a semi-circle, finger pointed at the walls.

Stella let her eyes follow the pointing finger. The walls of Joey's living room were nearly covered with—Joaquin's words stuck in her mind—*bizebull*

momentoes. She knew some of them by heart. Most plentiful were the framed photos: Lou Gehrig with an arm around a young Joey's shoulders. Bob Feller following through on a pitch. Mickey Mantle. The late Billy Martin shaking a fist under Joey's nose—playfully, not menacingly as that batter had done a few minutes ago. And a dozen more baseball figures, most of whose names Stella had forgotten despite the fact that Joey had led her around the room on several occasions, introducing her to each hero, reading aloud the autographed *Dear Joey* messages penned on each.

Her gaze came to rest on the *pièce de résistance*: a genuine Louisville Slugger bat with a genuine, dark-ink signature of Babe Ruth scrawled on its shank. It lay horizontally against the wall, suspended by two golden cords. Below it sat, incongruously, a walnut swivel chair with a brass plate on its back. Engraved on the plate, she recalled, were words that went something like: "This was Billy Martin's personal chair. It sat in his office during his second tenure as manager of the New York Yankees."

Life after baseball for Joey, thought Stella, amounted to little but more baseball.

"Oh, I know," said Gertrude,

as though she were reading Stella's thoughts. "But you have to understand, Stella—baseball was Joey's whole life. And he was respected as a baseball writer, by the players as well as the fans. This—" she waved an arm at the walls again "—is all he has left."

"Not quite all," Minerva said softly. "Now he has me."

Rarely was Stella taken aback; usually she was well out ahead of the game. But this time she was reduced to staring, wide-eyed. First at Minerva. Then at the tight, phony smile on Gertrude's ample countenance.

"Yes," said Gertrude. "Joey gave me the fascinating news yesterday morning, Stella. He has asked Minerva to marry him—and she has accepted."

Stella opened her mouth, but no words emerged. Then she sat down, abruptly, in Billy Martin's old swivel chair. So abruptly that the casters rolled and the chair slammed into the wall beneath Babe Ruth's bat.

"Well, oh my . . . how nice," she said at last, aware that the remark was totally inane, and aware also that she had, without really trying, achieved that which had brought her to Joey's apartment: She now knew the subject of the discussion that had penetrated the trash room wall.

"Thank you," said Minerva, patting her bobbed hair. "And Gertrude has been so sweet about the whole thing."

I'll bet, thought Stella. She wondered if she should walk out right now and let them get at one another's throats again.

She said, "I suppose you'll be moving in here—after you're married, of course?"

"Oh, yes. After we're married, of course."

"Will you redecorate?" Stella looked around the photo-decked walls, considering what she should do with them if she were in Minerva's shoes, heaven forbid.

"Well," said Minerva, smiling a conspiratorial smile, "I do have a preference for Renaissance prints. But of course Joey and I haven't discussed it yet."

"When you do, it should make for an interesting discussion," said Stella. She recalled the time that Harriet Cutliffe had sought to persuade Joey that he really should not wear his baseball cap at the Friday night bingo sessions. Joey had thrown a tantrum that did not quit until Gertrude hauled him screaming from the room. For a little man, Joey had a temper of homerun caliber.

"Well, Stella, it was nice of you to stop by," Minerva said suddenly, making it clear that Stella was dismissed and sounding as though she had al-

ready taken over Joey's apartment.

Stella departed, pausing outside the closed door just long enough to hear the voices behind it raised to their earlier confrontational level. It would be interesting to get both sides of this great debate. Tomorrow she would have to get together with both girls again—one at a time, of course.

The get-togethers took place next morning, but not quite in the manner Stella had anticipated. As she walked down the hallway en route to Gertrude's apartment, she found the door to Joey's unit standing open. A male voice, not Joey's, emerged from within. There was, of course, nothing for Stella to do but enter.

In the living room she found Gertrude sitting on the sofa, elbows on her knees and head in her hands, looking distraught. Across from her, seated in the Billy Martin chair, was a rather rough-hewn middle-aged man in a rumpled suit.

"As I was saying," he was saying, "we will make inquiries throughout the neighborhood, of course. But sometimes these old people—beggin' your pardon, ma'am—just climb on a bus and we find them next day wandering around clear across town. So I don't see no reason to be too alarmed yet."

"You don't see any reason,"

said Stella, before either of the others realized she was standing there in the living room doorway.

The man turned and looked up at her.

"No, not hardly none at all," he said, missing completely the gratuitous grammar lesson he had just received.

"Oh, Stella," moaned Gertrude, voice and chins trembling. "Joey's disappeared! Nobody's seen him since he was down there on the playfield yesterday afternoon. And look . . ." She waved her hand around the room.

Stella was already looking. The walls were bare, except for nails protruding where yesterday had been pictures of ball-players. The gold cords that had held Babe Ruth's bat now dangled empty against the wall. The only baseball treasure remaining was the chair in which the late Billy Martin had once sat and which the visitor now occupied.

The visitor arose. "I'm Detective Monahan from North City Precinct. And you're . . .?"

She told him who she was, and that Joey might be a bit juvenile in his interests but he certainly was not senile enough to go wandering off on his own and, besides, everyone knew that it wasn't safe in this neighborhood with all those muggers and purse snatchers and drug

peddlers out there. And if the police were wise, they would begin by locating Joaquin Somebody and Pablo Somebody, who had shown such an interest in Joey's now-missing collection of memorabilia.

Detective Monahan nodded gravely as she spoke. Then, with repeated assurances of police follow-through, he departed. Stella debated whether to go over and put an arm around Gertrude and try to comfort her, but she had never really known the woman that well. She compromised by sitting in the chair just vacated and making suitable clucking noises.

As it turned out, now that the policeman was gone, Gertrude no longer appeared in need of comforting. Her voice was strong as she said, "Stella, do you think Joey could have taken his baseball stuff himself? Bundled it up and carted it off to some storage place?"

"Why would he do that?"

"Well, if he's decided to run away to avoid facing Minerva and telling her he's not going to marry her after all . . ." There was an openly hopeful note in Gertrude's voice. "I mean, I don't know that he's decided to drop that gold digger, but—"

"Gold digger? You mean you think Minerva is after Joseph's money? He never struck me as

the moneyed type." Stella fixed Gertrude with the stare she usually reserved for strangers entering the Golden Age lobby. "Of course you'd know about his assets, though. After all, he was—is—your own flesh and blood."

"Not really, my dear. Not really flesh and blood, I mean." Gertrude looked at the floor. "I may as well tell you: Joey's actually only my stepbrother. My father married Joey's mother when we were both little kids. Of course, we were raised like brother and sister."

"Well, that's a surprise. But it does explain how he can be so small and have a sister so—" She caught herself just in time to avoid the word *huge*. "Neither of you ever married, I suppose?"

Gertrude shook her head. "I've just kind of looked after Joey most of his life."

"Well, I can understand why you don't want some woman to get him this late in life." Get him, Stella thought, and get his *money*—whatever it amounted to.

From Joey's Stella descended to Minerva's fifth-floor apartment. Minerva answered the door in one of her endless array of contemporary-style dresses (much too young for her), but sadness looked out of her big brown eyes.

"Oh," she said softly. "You know."

Stella nodded. "I just stopped by to see if there is anything I can do. May I come in?"

"Please do."

The living room window was open, letting in a fresh spring breeze and the shouts of young baseball players already cavorting around the playfield diamond. Traffic sounds drifted up from Brighton Avenue, and a sudden loud slamming and grinding noise told her the garbage truck was making its thrice-weekly visit to the Dumpster, reminding her that she had forgotten to dump the sackload of old magazines she had painfully decided to get rid of.

"The police detective was just here," said Minerva. "He seems to think Joey just wandered away, or maybe panicked after realizing he'd promised to marry me."

"I suppose there could be something to that hypothesis," said Stella. "He may have come to realize that you're, well, rather a high-quality person compared to, well . . ."

"Oh, come now." The big brown eyes scolded her. "Besides, the pickings are pretty slim for all of us widows. You must be aware of that—you're a widow, aren't you?"

"Oh, yes. I lost my Walter eight years ago, God rest his

departed soul." Stella paused, switched conversational gears. "I have to think Joseph's disappearance had something to do with the fact that his baseball things were apparently stolen."

Minerva nodded. "I agree. But to think that anyone could consider them valuable enough to . . ."

"Exactly." So Minerva was thinking, too, that there might have been foul play. But before Stella could pursue this line of thought, Minerva gave her a sad smile and patted her shoulder.

"I do appreciate your stopping, and please feel free anytime," said Minerva, dismissing her for the second time in as many days.

She took the elevator to ground level and, bypassing the lobby, walked past the kitchen and out the delivery door in the rear. Sharply aware that she was violating her own safety code, she crossed the parking lot, opened the back gate, and stepped onto the playfield near the third-base line.

There was a batter at the plate. Two boys stood nearby, swinging bats as they awaited their turns. Stella immediately recognized one of them as Joaquin.

As she approached him, she was astonished to see that she also recognized the bat.

How utterly brazen, she thought.

"Let me see that bat!" she demanded.

Joaquin stared at her, mouth open without showing the white teeth. Wordlessly, he handed her the bat. She held it close to her bifocals, just to be sure. The authentic, handwritten signature of Babe Ruth stared back at her.

"I'll just take it," she said.

"No," he said, reaching. "Geeve eet back. Eet's mine."

"It's Joseph's. You stole it—after you did heaven knows what to—"

"I foun' it!"

"On Joseph's wall."

The game had stopped. The other boys were beginning to gather around, drawn by an impending drama potentially more interesting than a pickup game of ball. Stella swept them with a withering look and turned to walk away, clutching the bat firmly with both hands.

"Wait!" Joaquin grabbed her arm. "I foun' it, I tell you—right over there!" He pointed toward the Golden Age Tower, toward the high wooden door facing the parking lot, the door behind which the just-emptied Dumpster sat hidden from sight. "Joey throw it in the garbage—he mus' not want it no more."

"Like he doesn't want his right arm no more," said Stella, committing the unpardonable

sin of a double negative before she realized it. But give him this, she thought: He was a quick thinker. These neighborhood kids did prowl the Dumpster rather often, and sometimes they found things they could sell or hock or—she shuddered at the thought—even eat.

"Lady, gimme my bat!"

She turned and faced him. "I am taking this bat to the police. One more word out of you, young man, and I'll be forced to make a citizen's arrest!"

Joaquin may not have known a citizen's arrest from any other kind, but he knew that arrests in general could only spell large trouble in his neighborhood. He shrugged and turned away.

Back at her apartment, Stella left a call at the North City Precinct for Detective Monahan, who was not in. Then, going to the bedroom closet to hide Babe Ruth's bat behind some extra pillows, just in case, she spotted the undumped paper bag of old magazines. She picked it up and headed down the hallway.

As she dropped the magazines down the chute she expected, without thinking about it, to hear them send back a loud noise when they finally arrived at the Dumpster eleven stories below. It didn't happen that way. Instead, there was a flat-sounding *thunk*, and it came well before the bundle had time

to arrive at the Dumpster.

"What the hell?" she said, employing a phrase she had last used the night she found her Walter writhing on the bathroom floor in the throes of his final heart attack.

Two minutes later she was peering down the dim chute with the aid of the flashlight she owned in case of earthquakes or power outages. The yellow beam quickly spotted an assortment of trash, suspended surely no more than three or four floors below. There were her magazines, and a small collection of plastic garbage bags. And, if she were not mistaken, the corner of a picture frame barely visible among them.

As she lowered the door to the chute, she noticed the two narrow, parallel depressions in the gray carpet, nearly obliterated by shoe prints. It was as she leaned down to examine them more closely that she spotted the green button on the floor. Without experiencing her usual sense of distaste, she thought about a red and blue Hawaiian shirt with green buttons.

"Oh, my God!" she said.

An hour later, with Detective Monahan in charge, it was determined that the blockage in the garbage chute was between the seventh and eighth floors. A uniformed policeman, taller

but no bigger around than Joey Mazer, entered the eighth-floor trash disposal room carrying a long pole with a hook on one end, a coil of rope, and what appeared to be a short rope ladder. Another cop seemed dedicated to the task of keeping the room's doors closed in the faces of Stella, Gertrude, Minerva, and a trio of other senior citizens clustered in the hallway.

The door opened once, briefly, enough for Stella to note a small pile of white plastic bags and several ballplayer photos leaning against them. Someone's sack had burst open, and the aroma of deceased fish assailed her nostrils.

A bit later Monahan emerged from the tiny room and ordered the onlookers to disperse. Stella turned away, but not before she had managed to peer past the detective's shoulder and glimpse a red and blue Hawaiian pattern against the gray of the carpet. At least, she told herself, the poor soul had not suffered the indignity of coming to rest in a Dumpster full of garbage.

For reasons not entirely clear to Stella, they chose to gather in Joey's bare-walled apartment, just the three of them. Stella sat beside Gertrude on the sofa, making consoling sounds, though Gertrude seemed to be holding up remarkably

well in view of the death of her stepbrother. Minerva kept moving from place to place, staring at nothing with those brown eyes that seemed larger than ever now because her face had lost its color.

Soon Detective Monahan came in, accompanied by a barrel-chested man whom he introduced as Detective Brodsky of Homicide.

Brodsky looked immediately at Stella. "I understand you're the one who recovered the baseball bat. We suspect what you brought us was the murder weapon, but we won't know for sure till we have it examined. Maybe not even then, because it's been used a bit today. In the meantime, we're trying to find the young man who gave it to you."

"Oh, don't be too harsh on Joaquin. I've now decided he was telling me the truth," said Stella, grimacing as she recalled how difficult it had been to overcome her honest inclination in arriving at that decision. "I think Joseph's killer panicked and got rid of the bat, and then realized perhaps that the body could be disposed of the same way."

Brodsky, his wide bottom now settled tightly in Billy Martin's swivel chair, leaned forward. "You're suggesting that the killer got the idea of pushing

the body down that chute only after dropping the bat down it?"

Stella nodded. "If the body had gone first, wouldn't the bat have hung up on it—on the body, where it had become wedged partway down the chute? Just like Joseph's photos did, and the bags of garbage people tossed in later?"

"Pretty obvious," said Brodsky. "Are we supposed to make anything of it?"

Stella had been trying to make something of it for the past half hour, and by now her mental muddle was beginning to sort itself out.

"If the killer knew about the garbage chute," she said, "he—or she—probably knew the Dumpster would be emptied this morning; it always is on Wednesdays. So, with luck, Joseph's body would be carted away and disappear forever in a sanitary landfill."

"Interesting," Brodsky conceded. "People would think he had just run away. My colleague here theorized a bit along those lines at first. So he went to Mr. Mazer's bank to find whether there'd been any large withdrawals in the past few days. Such a withdrawal might have indicated that Mr. Mazer intended to vanish. Why don't you tell them what you found, Dave?"

Detective Monahan looked

uncomfortable as he studied the three women. Stella suspected that the police were accustomed to talking with only one person—one *suspect?*—at a time.

"There weren't no withdrawals," Monahan said, and Stella didn't even wince. "I did, though, turn up one piece of interesting information. I found out the deceased—of course, I didn't know he was deceased at the time—he owned nearly a million bucks' worth of securities through that bank. All quite conservative—CD's, money market accounts, that sort of thing."

"You knew that, of course, Miss Mazer?" Brodsky fired the question almost before Monahan's last words were out.

Gertrude's mouth fell open, closed, opened again. "Why, yes. Yes, I knew."

"Did your brother have any relatives besides you?"

"Not that I know of."

"Then upon his death," said Brodsky, "you stood to inherit his entire estate, I take it. Unless, of course, he chose to will it to someone else."

The detective glanced meaningfully toward Minerva. Stella was impressed; the police had done their homework quickly.

"Joey didn't have a will," Gertrude said firmly.

"Ah, but he did," said Monahan. "He talked to the bank's

trust department about making one out. They sent him to a lawyer. As of two days ago he had a will—leaving nearly everything to Ms. Minerva Helgeson here."

Gertrude's face went red. "He never told me that."

"But when you learned he was going to marry Ms. Helgeson, didn't you suspect he might do some such thing?"

Gertrude nodded, lowering her head. "I suppose so. And after I've watched over him all these years?"

Gertrude's shoulders were shaking. The sofa was shaking. Stella looked from one detective to the other, fascinated. It was Detective Brodsky who broke the brief silence.

"Your brother wasn't very large, Miss Mazer. Even so, assuming he was killed right here, it would seem to have needed a pretty strong person to lug his body out to the trash chute."

All eyes were on Gertrude, who obviously was a pretty strong person. All eyes but Stella's.

"Not necessarily," Stella found herself saying.

"Not necessarily what?" asked Brodsky.

"It would not necessarily require a strong person." Stella pushed herself off the sofa and shuffled across the room to Brodsky, whose bulk was still

comfortably ensconced in the Billy Martin chair.

"Sit up straight, please," she ordered him. "And lift your feet off the floor."

He looked up at her in surprise, then silently complied with her order. Stella grasped the back of the chair firmly. Ignoring the bursitic pain in her shoulders, she swung it around and pushed.

The chair rolled easily on its casters. She heard Brodsky swear softly as he sat there motionless, like an invalid in a wheelchair. Turning the chair again, she pushed it through the arched doorway and into the entry hall, with all two hundred pounds of Detective Brodsky still aboard.

Back in the living room, not even short of breath, she sat down and addressed her audience.

"You see," she said. "If an arthritic old woman can push that chair with a large man in it, *anyone* could push it with a small man in it—dead or alive. Even Minerva."

Minerva, her petite form looking lost in a barrel chair in the room's far corner, lifted a hand, let it flutter back into her lap.

"What does that prove?" she demanded.

"Nothing by itself," said Stella. She was beginning to

enjoy herself. "But if the police gentlemen will go out to the trash room, I think they will still be able to see the wheel marks from that chair on the carpet. It took me a while to grasp their significance. I dare-say it won't take the detectives that long."

But the detectives weren't going anywhere at the moment. They looked at each other, and some kind of silent message seemed to flow between them. Then they looked at Minerva.

Brodsky, standing in the doorway, said, "Ms. Helgeson. Did you know, before Detective Monahan mentioned it, that Mr. Mazer had drawn up a will in your favor?"

His words came out rapid-fire, a bit like Stella supposed a machine gun might sound.

Minerva appeared startled. "Why, yes, we talked about it." Then she appeared angered, quite suddenly. "Say, what are you getting at? If you're trying to accuse me— So I was in his will. We were getting married. I wasn't going to be lonely any more. Why would I have killed him?"

"Ms. Helgeson, do you know how all those ballplayer pictures happened to get tossed down the garbage chute?" Rapid-fire again. From Monahan this time.

Minerva looked from one de-

tective to the other, then away. Her eyes, no longer limpid pools, met Stella's and sent a chill down Stella's spine.

"Those horrid, little-boy baseball things." She spat out the words. "I couldn't stand them. I took them down because I was getting ready to move in with Joey. It's a woman's right to have some say in how her home is decorated."

"You threw them down the chute?" asked Brodsky.

"I meant just to have him put them in storage."

"You didn't answer my question, Ms. Helgeson. Why don't you just tell us exactly what happened?"

Stella could see exactly what was happening right here, right now. Minerva's aplomb was disintegrating under the two-man barrage.

"All right," said Minerva, "so Joey came in just as I finished taking down his damned pictures. I didn't know he had such an awful temper. He yelled and threatened me. So I threw them down the garbage."

"You threw them," Monahan reminded her, "*after* his body went down the garbage. They hung up on his body."

Minerva's head was bowed, and tears dripped onto her designer outfit. "Like I said. He threatened me."

"Threatened you physically."

"Yes. Every way. I had to defend myself."

"Hogwash!" Gertrude entered the discussion like a bursting pipe bomb. "Joey had a temper. But there wasn't a violent bone in his body. He never threatened anybody in his life."

"He did! He even threatened to cancel—said he was going to cancel the will!" The tears came then in a flood, and Minerva's hands flew up and covered her face. She had trapped herself and, Stella saw with some satisfaction, was just now fully realizing it.

With all attention focused on

a tearful Minerva, Stella slipped from the room unnoticed. She walked down the hall toward her own apartment. She was so tired her bones ached. If the police wanted to know how it was that she had recognized Minerva's guilt before they did, they could jolly well wait a few hours. Then she would tell them: Sure, Gertrude might have been capable of killing in order to prevent her stepbrother from making out that will. But after all, if she had put up with Joey's foibles all these years, she certainly wouldn't have thrown out his bizebull momentos this late in the game.

(Continued from Page-6)

The early micro-organisms took this out and replaced it with oxygen. This was good for humans but it caused the death of all the species that thrived on carbon dioxide. For them oxygen was poison. Lovelock argues that, even today, oxygen is a poison to most organisms. "It is oxygen which eventually kills us. Over decades of breathing it in, it gradually causes irreversible damage to our cells that finally leads to death," Lovelock argues.

The question arises, "Are we creating a change in the environment that is so great we will not be able to survive under the new conditions?" Lovelock believes that the system is on the verge of failure. He has questioned environment and conservation groups and he has accused them of focussing wrong issues. The ozone layer is a minor issue. Our activities are increasing the carbon dioxide and causing the planet to heat up.

But if Lovelock is right, then life itself will go on regardless of that humans do. We may ruin things for ourselves but 'earth' itself will live and continue - new species will evolve that can live in the changed environment we create. The life will continue and

Mojo Man

by Doug Allyn

Axton watched the Beech Bonanza drop out of the waning sun and touch down lightly on the runway, snow devils swirling and dancing behind it as it taxied toward the terminal. Turco's charter flight? He hoped so. He hated waiting around airfields when he wasn't getting paid.

Linnea Harris apparently didn't like waiting, either. She'd been pacing the nearly deserted V.I.P. lounge since Axton arrived. She was a striking woman, not pretty in the conventional sense—hawkish, aquiline nose, wide set gray eyes, short auburn hair, no makeup, none needed. She was wearing a rumpled dun trenchcoat that somehow looked chic on her. A tarpaulin would have looked chic on her.

Her companion, Benjie, a chubby guy in thick granny glasses and faded denims, knew how to wait. He was folded across two chairs, zonked, a "Turco and the Turks" tour cap tipped down over his eyes.

The sleeper suddenly blinked awake, caught Ax staring at him, and grinned, an open apple pie of a smile. He stood up, yawned and stretched, then

trotted over to the tunnel door just as Gary Turco pushed through it. Turco handed the kid a guitar case, and Benjie jogged off, no greeting, no handshake. All business. Turco was taller than Axton had expected, cornstalk thin, pallid as a vampire, his albino blond hair teased into a rock star shambles, stubbled jaw, sunglasses. He was wearing an ankle-length black leather overcoat.

"Welcome to Detroit, Mr. Turco," Linnea Harris said. "Good flight?"

"Fine," Turco said curtly as Ax sauntered up. "Is this guy my new bodyguard?"

"No, sir," Axton said, his drawl thick enough to pour over grits, "leastways not yet. Benjie asked me to meet your plane, but he said you'd decide whether I get hired or no."

"Where'd Benjie get you?"

"Bob Seger's road manager recommended me. I've worked security for Seger, Rod Stewart, the Stones. My name's Axton, R. B. People call me Ax."

"Yeah?" Turco said, unimpressed. "I guess you're big enough, Axton, but your face

looks like you lose more fights than you win."

"Motorcycle accident," Ax said. "You lookin' for a bodyguard or a model?"

"You got a concealed weapons permit?"

Ax nodded.

"Then I guess you'll do for now."

"Maybe not," Ax said, "we need to clear the air first. If I sign on, I bodyguard. I don't gofer, I don't pimp. Unless you're diabetic I don't want to see any needles; if you smoke dope, you hold your own stash. I'll keep the little girls from ripping your clothes off, but I won't sneak 'em up to your room. You still want to hire me?"

Turco arched one eyebrow and shot Linnea Harris a look. "Did anybody tell him why I need a new guy?"

"Mr. Turco's last bodyguard is in a Toronto hospital," Linnea said evenly, gauging Ax's reaction, "with two broken arms and a concussion. And just for the record, Mr.—Axton, he wasn't a pimp either. He was a former N.F.L. linebacker."

"What happened to him?"

"Two guys came by my dressing room at the Toronto Civic Auditorium while I was on-stage," Turco said. "There was a—scuffle, my bodyguard got the short end."

"Two broken arms doesn't

sound like a scuffle," Ax said, "more like a train wreck. What'd they want?"

"We don't know, they didn't say."

"Do you know what your bodyguard said to them?"

"What he said? No, why?"

"Just wonderin'," Ax shrugged, "so I can avoid sayin' it to anybody."

"Very prudent," Turco nodded, smiling faintly. "You know, we might just get along, Axton. You want the gig or not?"

"Absolutely. And call me Ax. Everybody calls me Ax."

Benjie pulled up at the passenger pickup lane in a silver six-seat GM van, which surprised Axton. He'd figured Turco for the limousine type. Turco and Linnea Harris climbed into the back and immediately went into a heavy conference. Ax helped Benjie load the luggage, taking special care with Turco's guitar, then climbed into the passenger seat up front.

"So, you want to fill me in?" Ax said. "What brings y'all to Detroit?"

"Recording studio," Benjie said, gunning the van into the river of headlights leaving the airport. "Turco and the Turks just finished a sold-out Canadian tour and inked a new record deal with Magnus Music. Magnus gave Gary a studio of

his own here in Detroit as part of the deal."

"Where does the lady come in?"

"She's on loan to us from Magnus headquarters in New York to help Gary get the studio up and running. She's a vice-president for label liaison. Got a nice sound, don't it? Label liaison."

"I think it means company spy."

"I think you're right," Benjie grinned, glancing at Ax curiously. "You know the music business?"

"I've been at it awhile," Ax nodded, "how about you?"

"I've been with the Turks from day one. Started out as a roadie when they were playin' bars, strip joints, anything we could get, worked my way up to road manager. Lotta long miles, short money, but Gary always said we'd make it. And this year things finally started to happen. Canadian tour sold out, then the record deal with Magnus. When we get our studio runnin', we'll be on top. Bigtime."

"Bigtime," Ax echoed, "right. Where are we headed? A hotel?"

"Nope, the Porkpie Hat. A black club downtown, just off Cass. You know it?"

"I've been there," Ax said. "Who's playing?"

"Kid named LeVoy Tyrone. Smokin' blues guitarist, good singer. Gary figures he can be

the next B.B. King if he's handled right."

"Somehow I never pictured a heavy metal hero like Turco as a blues fan."

"Don't let the eyeshadow fool ya. Gary's a complicated guy. I imagine a lotta people take you for a dummy just because you're big and talk like you grew up in Mayberry or someplace."

"Considerin' what happened to my predecessor, they might be right."

"Your what?"

"Never mind. Take a left here, I know a shortcut to the Hat."

The Porkpie Hat was a converted supermarket with plywood-panel windows, low ceilings, a spotlit stage at one end, a glass-brick bar at the other. Strings of flickering Christmas lights taped to the ceiling cut the gloom enough to make walking possible, barely. The club was jumping, the audience a racial bouillabaisse, college kids from nearby Wayne State, street hustlers from the Cass Corridor, a few parties of middle-agers dressed to the nines.

The manager greeted Benjie warmly and personally escorted the party to a table near the dance floor, which meant the kid had laid out some heavy bread. The band was jamming "Big Leg Woman" as Turco's

party was being seated, and they were as good as Benjie had promised, perhaps better. The rhythm section, keyboards, Fender bass and drums, was tight and taut, but the star of the show was the young lead guitarist. He looked more like a young black banker than a band guy, conservative suit, narrow tie, horn-rimmed glasses, hair cropped close and razor parted, which made his manic, brilliant playing all the more surprising. He cooked a long solo at the end of "Big Leg," taking the tune and the audience back to the Delta origins of the blues, then snapped back to the mean Motown streets with a flare of fingertap flash at the finish.

Ax and Benjie both rose and applauded, and they weren't alone, most of the older blacks were also standing, whooping, giving the youth his proper for a job well done and for keeping the blues alive. No reaction from Turco, though, he was chatting up Linnea Harris as though nothing had happened. He leaned over as Ax resumed his seat.

"Don't do that again," he said softly, with an edged, plastic smile, "we're here on business, okay?"

"You're the boss," Ax shrugged, "but most artists prefer doin' business with people

who appreciate their work, you know?"

Turco ignored him, turned back to the woman. But she glanced across at Axton as though really noticing him for the first time. Their eyes met across the table for a moment, and Ax felt a soft *click*. Then Turco said something to her and she turned away. Still, there'd been something in that look. Maybe.

When the set was over, Benjie made his way to the stage, spoke to the guitarist, and brought him back to the table.

"Mr. Turco, this is LeVoy Tyrone. LeVoy, this is Gary Turco, Linnea Harris from Magnus Music and—"

"Hello, Ax," LeVoy said softly, "how you been doin'?"

"Anybody I can. You sounded great, as usual."

"Thank you," LeVoy said, easing into a seat.

"You know Mr. Axton?" Turco said, his eyebrows arching a quarter inch.

"Everybody knows Ax," LeVoy smiled, "he's—notorious, you know? Not the same as bein' famous, but close. He workin' for you?"

"At the moment," Turco nodded grudgingly. "I, ah, liked what I heard of your set. I also liked the demo tape Benjie sent me, especially one cut, 'Hard Luck Man,' the old Mojo Tyrone jam."

"Just keepin' it in the family. My uncle wrote it."

"Mojo Tyrone was your uncle?"

"Well, actually he's my dad's uncle, but we all call him Uncle Mo'. Why?"

"Dammit, I knew it," Turco grinned, "I knew there was something familiar about your style. Not to mention your name. You sound a little bit like him."

"Maybe so," LeVoy said neutrally, "we still jam together some."

"Jam together?" Turco said. "I thought he died back in the sixties."

"Almost did. He had a bad stroke, was in a rest home for a long time. My dad put it out that he died so people would leave him be."

"But he's better now? He can still play?"

"Some," LeVoy said cautiously, "he's nothin' like he was. The stroke pretty much paralyzed his left side. Why so interested in my uncle?"

"No big thing," Gary shrugged, "it's just that I really dug his music when I was growing up. Considering how many guitar heroes've cashed in their chips, it's good to hear one of 'em's still around. Could you arrange for me to meet him sometime?"

"That's probably not a good idea," LeVoy said. "He, ah, ain't in the best shape mentally, you

know? He's an old man, lives alone."

"I understand," Turco nodded, "but think about it, okay? It'd mean a lot to me. Tell you what, I think you've got real potential both as a singer and a player. If you're interested in a record deal, why don't we do breakfast after your gig, work out the details?"

"You mean tonight?" LeVoy sounded surprised.

"Time is money, Mr. Tyrone," Turco said, smiling faintly. "I never waste either one."

"I guess you don't. Thing is, my father's the businessman in the family. How about we meet at, say, ten tomorrow morning at my dad's pawnshop, over on Livernois. Ax knows where it is."

"Somehow that doesn't surprise me," Turco sighed. "Ten'll be fine."

"Good, meantime I got two more sets to do. Nice meetin' you all."

Turco stared after him. "Mojo Tyrone's nephew," he said softly. "I'll be damned."

"I don't get it," Benjie said, "who in hell was Mojo Tyrone?"

"Who was he?" Gary said, surprised. "He was a great blues player, like Muddy Waters, or Howlin' Wolf."

"Who?"

"Never mind," Turco sighed. "Sometimes I think havin' your

head screwed on straight in this business is like being the smartest kid in the third grade. Let's blow this joint, I've had a long day."

The night was brisk, a few snowflakes dancing in the parking lot lights as they hurried toward the van. Just ahead of them, four men moved out of the shadows, blocking their path. Street punks, hard-eyed whiteboys, matching blue running suits, hightop white sneakers, blue bandannas over their faces like highwaymen.

"Cool out, folks," the tallest of them said, stepping forward, "just fork over and nobody gets hurt. Money on the ground, then jus' boogie on back inside." He flicked his wrist, flashing an eight inch butterfly knife open, blade agleam in the faint light. "Shuck your coat, too," he said to Turco, "looks like my size. Take it off."

"You gotta be kiddin'," Turco said, sidling to his left, "you think you just wave a blade and people fold up? You never heard of guns?" Ax was already moving to his right; Benjie stayed with Linnea, herding her back.

"Look, sucker—"

"Nah, you look," Turco said, snaking his belt out from under his coat, a motorcycle chain belt, chrome steel links glittering as he hummed it overhead like a

bullwhip and slapped it on the pavement with a gunshot *crack!* "My bodyguard's got a piece," Turco said grimly, nodding at Ax, "and I got five pounds of iron here, and what you got, *sucker*, is about three seconds to beat feet, or buy a ride in an ambulance, sirens and all. What's it gonna be?"

Turco was swinging the chainbelt back and forth like a pendulum. The thug in front seemed hypnotized by it, but one of his buddies glanced at Ax, who was still circling them, his hand inside his coat.

Without a word the guy broke and ran. The others exchanged glances, then followed him. "I'll be back!" the tall one shouted, stabbing a finger at Turco. "You ain't seen the lasta me!"

"Bring yo mama next time!" Turco yelled after him, cracking the belt overhead. Benjie sprinted to the van, yanked open the sliding door, and climbed behind the wheel as the others scrambled inside.

"Come on, Benjie," Turco panted, "fire it up before they come back and Axton has to shoot somebody."

"That'd be a pretty good trick," Ax said, "considering I'm not carrying."

"What?" Turco said, stunned. "You're unarmed? What the hell kind of a bodyguard are you?"

"The kind that doesn't carry

guns into airports," Ax said evenly. "I got a call to meet a plane, remember?"

"Fortunately, you weren't needed," Linnea snapped, "since Gary— What? What's so funny?"

Benjie was giggling hysterically, laughing so hard he could barely keep the van on the road. Turco was shaking his head slowly, grinning.

"The chainbelt's just for looks," Turco said, "it's not real, it's only plastic. I was bluffing, figured Axton could handle things if it didn't work."

"Plastic," Linnea echoed, "plastic? My God, what if they hadn't run?"

"If we were lucky, adjoining hospital rooms," Ax said. "Oh, and by the way, welcome to Motown, folks."

Benjie dropped Linnea at the parking ramp near the studio. Axton walked her to her car, trying to come up with something witty to say, but the night wind harried them along, whipping his thoughts away. She slid angrily behind the wheel of her BMW without a backward glance. Left him standing in the deserted parking ramp, chilled by more than the wind. Tough lady, he thought, all business. Still, there'd been that moment in the club when their eyes met. Maybe. Hell. He jogged back to the van.

"Sit back here," Turco said, "I want to talk to you."

"What about?" Ax asked, sliding into the plush, throne-backed seat opposite Turco.

"About you. For openers, where're you from originally? Alabama?"

"Missouri. Little town called Winona."

"How'd you end up here?"

"I was a bass player in a road band, we got booked up here. We were doin' okay until I skidded my 'cycle into a tree. Got my face banged up, my right hand too. I couldn't play for awhile so the band split for the coast. I stayed on, worked as a troubleshooter for a couple of booking agents, turned out to be pretty good at it. So I opened my own office, got a P.I. license so I could carry—"

"A P.I. license? You're a detective?"

"That's what my license says. Mostly I just—fix things for people in the business, mediate contract hassles, collect percentages, book, bodyguard, whatever."

"And the Tyrone kid? How do you know him?"

"I know most of the players in Motown, one way or another. LeVoy's righteous, from what I hear. No drugs, no hassles. Head's screwed on straight."

"He struck me that way, too. What about his uncle?"

"Mojo Tyrone? I had one of his albums back home but never

made the connection with LeVoy. I thought the ol' guy was dead."

"Me too. I guess we were supposed to. Thing is, I saw him play once," Turco said, as much to himself as to Ax, "at a festival when I was a kid. He was hammered, stoned to the bone, but he still did a helluva show. Something about him... You know what I'm sayin'?"

"Magic time," Ax nodded. "I've seen LeVoy hit that groove a few times."

"Have you ever seen my group play?" Turco asked, a bit too casually.

"A few years ago, in Atlanta, when you opened for Kiss."

"And we were wearing dresses and makeup, and we definitely weren't magic, right?"

"You had a solid commercial sound," Ax said carefully, "you worked the crowd well. It must've been tough, opening for Kiss."

"Nothing about this business is easy," Turco said quietly, "nothing. You bust your butt, play a million one nighters in hick towns... and still never make it."

"Well, you're making it now," Ax said.

Gary glanced at him sharply, reading him for an implied slight, then took a deep breath. "Yeah," he said, "I'm makin' it now. But..."

"But what?"

"Never mind. What about LeVoy's father? You know him?"

"Willis Tyrone," Ax nodded, "I've met him. He's big, surly, runs a pawnshop on the wrong side of Montcalm. Deals guns and numbers. From what I hear, he's nobody to cross."

"A guns and numbers king," Turco sighed, "terrific. I think I need a drink. Hey, Benjie, how far is it to my new apartment?"

"We're here," Benjie said, swinging the van into a parking garage.

"You're gonna love this place, Gary," Benjie said eagerly, as they rode the elevator up, "it's got a view of the river, kingsize waterbed, big screen TV—" The elevator door shushed open but Ax grabbed Benjie before he could step out. "What—"

"Is that the place?" Ax said, "the one with the door open?"

"We'd better get out of here," Turco said, fading back to the rear of the elevator.

"Cool it a second," Ax said, "I don't hear anything. Let me take a quick look." He edged warily along the wall to the doorway, risked a glance inside.

Chaos.

The apartment door had been jimmied and the place was a shambles, TV kicked in, furniture slashed and gutted. A DayGlo orange sentence was spraypainted on one wall: DO

THE RIGHT THING. Ax did the right thing. He grabbed a broken table leg and did a wary recon of the apartment. The other rooms were empty and just as trashed. He tossed the table leg into the living room debris and brushed the painted message with his fingertips. Dry.

"Interesting," Ax said. "A film fan with taste."

"What?" Turco echoed numbly, staring at the wreckage from the doorway.

"*Do the Right Thing*, the Spike Lee flick? Good movie."

"You think this is some kind of a joke, Axton?" Turco snapped.

"Maybe not a joke exactly, but there's definitely something funny about it."

"Meaning what?"

"C'mon, Turco, I'm a little slow, but I can read the handwriting on the wall. Do the right thing. Your bodyguard gets stomped in Toronto. We get hassled in the Porkpie parking lot by white gangbusters who were as out of place there as nuns at a beer bust. That area's Black Pharaoh turf, and those punks could've been blown away just for walkin' past it, which means they weren't workin' the lot, they were waiting for us. And now your new apartment gets trashed. Not ripped off, trashed. Nobody's luck is that bad. So what's going on? What's this

'right thing' you're supposed to do?"

Turco met his eyes straight on a moment, then shrugged. "Nothing's going on. People in show biz attract crazies. Ask John Lennon."

"I'm asking you, Gary. Look, I'm on your side. You want protection, I'll do my best—"

"Your best hasn't been too impressive so far. Look, I hired you as a bodyguard. You want to play detective, do it on your own time, okay? What do we do now?"

"I guess we call the cops," Ax said, groping through the debris, rescuing a cordless phone, "if you don't mind them poking around."

"Call 'em. I've got nothing to hide."

"Right," Ax said, "whatever you say."

It turned out to be a very long night. Turco booked a room at the downtown Holiday Inn, leaving Ax at the trashed apartment to wait for the police. It was after two A.M. before a pair of bored patrolmen showed, took Ax's statement, and made a cursory search. Ax didn't make it back to his own place until four.

Promptly at nine the custom van pulled up in front of his apartment and beeped twice. Grousing, Ax pulled on a wool turtleneck, slipped into his

shoulder holster, grabbed his scuffed leather jacket, and took the stairs two at a time down to the street. His hair was still damp from the shower, and the hawk wind nipped at it, instant icecap. Gary Turco was behind the wheel wearing a conservative suit and tie, his shaggy albino mane tied back in a prim ponytail. "Did you call the pap-pers?" Turco asked as Ax climbed into the passenger seat.

"About what?"

"The burglary. We could have gotten some media coverage on it. Rock star ripped off his first day in Motown, something like that. You know the business, you should have thought of it."

"Good morning to you, too," Ax said, "and the apartment wasn't ripped off, just messed up."

"Who cares, as long as they spell my name right?" Gary grunted. "How do I get to LeVoy's father's shop?"

"Left at the next light. It's down a mile or so. Where's Benjie?"

"At the studio, getting things shipshape. And speaking of shipshape, from now on dress appropriately, okay? Jacket and tie."

"You wanna dress to impress Willis Tyrone; you'll have to do better than a jacket and tie."

"Yeah? Like what?"

"A full suit of armor. Or maybe a bulletproof vest."

The Revelation Pawnshop stretched half a city block on Montcalm, a brown brick building, its steel-grilled windows filled with radios, guitars, power tools. LeVoy Tyrone, looking studious in a maize and blue U of M sweater, met them at the door and escorted them back to his father's office, a large raised platform in the center of the rear wall ringed by a fortress of filing cabinets. Willis Tyrone observed their approach from his desk on the dais like a dark Buddha, a huge man, custom tailored lavender silk shirt stretched taut by his barrel chest, rep tie at half mast, a shaved head the size of a lineman's helmet, cool pawnbroker's eyes.

He rose as they mounted the platform, offered them seats and coffee. Gary gave him a copy of a recording contract. Willis scanned it cursorily, tossed it aside. "Seems straight enough," he grunted, his voice a deep bass rumble, "but I've seen it before. Uncle Maurice signed papers to make records for some white dudes, gonna get rich, take care of the family. He cut the records, worked himself damn near to death, and now I gotta take care of him. Whitey used him up, threw him away like trash."

"Mr. Tyrone," Gary said earnestly, "I can assure you—"

"Don't assure me nothin'," Willis interrupted, cutting Gary off with a wave of his massive paw. "I meet jive artists every day can talk the birds outa the trees, so don't make me no promises, Turco. Let me make you one. My boy's got his heart set on takin' a shot at music. I won't say no to him, but I ain't forgot what happened to my uncle, either. And I assure you, mister, that if LeVoy comes out on the short of this, I'm gonna hold you responsible. Ever heard an old blues song called 'Payin' the Cost to Be the Boss'?"

"Yes, sir, I think so."

"Good. Just remember anything goes wrong, you're gonna pay, and I've got dudes workin' for me who're real good at collectin'. You understand what I'm sayin'?"

"Fair enough," Gary nodded, "what about your uncle?"

"Maurice? What about him?"

"LeVoy told me he can still play a little. I've got this idea, of maybe taping him, using it to intro the first cut of LeVoy's record. Might make a good promotional gimmick. Any objection?"

"A gimmick," Willis shook his head slowly. "You people are all alike. You tell him what shape Maurice is in?" he asked LeVoy.

"No, sir. Just that he's—better than he was."

"Ain't sayin' much," Willis shrugged, "considerin' he was almost dead. You know why they call him Mojo, Mr. Turco? You know what it means?"

"It's—magic, right? Something to do with voodoo."

"That's right," Willis said, "you afraid of voodoo?"

"No, sir," Gary said evenly, "I'm not afraid of magic, or much of anything else."

"That's good," Willis nodded, showing a wolf's grin, "a young man needs sand to get on in life. I don't believe in magic neither, but Maurice was a seventh son, so he took it more serious. Still burns the candles, even thinks he brought himself back from the dead. You wanna see what's left of Maurice, you go right ahead. And take a good look. 'Cause if any wrong comes to my family because of you, you're seein' your future. And if that don't scare you some, boy, then you ain't near as bright as you look."

"I don't understand," LeVoy said somberly as they made their way through the cluttered aisles toward the front door. "I've seen him angry before, but not like this."

"He's afraid for you," Gary said, "because of what the life did to your uncle. He'll mellow

out when we can show him some long green, and the sooner we get a session rollin', the sooner we can do that. When can I meet your uncle?"

"Look, I really don't think that's such a hot idea," LeVoy said reluctantly. "He was in a home for a long time after his stroke. He's better now, but he's still—pretty strange."

"I promise not to upset the old guy, okay," Gary insisted. "I just wanna see him, maybe hear him play. I wouldn't ask if I didn't think it might be important."

"I guess I can fix it," LeVoy conceded, unconvinced. "This afternoon if you want. Time don't mean much to Uncle Maurice. Tell you what, he lives on a little farm out in Oxford, 2203 Rathbun Road. Meet me out there around two. I'll go out early, make sure it's okay."

"Why not just call ahead?"

"He's got no phone," LeVoy said, "and we better get a couple things straight. I'll meet you in the yard. If I'm not there, don't come up to the house. And if I say he don't wanna see you, you leave right then, no argument. Understand?"

"Why all the mystery?"

"No mystery. He's just a little—"

"—strange, right," Gary nodded. "Would it be better if I came alone?"

"Might be better if you came

with a battalion of Marines," LeVoy sighed, "but Ax'll have to do. But just you two. Nobody else."

The farmhouse stood alone on a snow-crusted barren knoll, a two room white clapboard building, its windows iced over and eyeless. There was a swaybacked barn out back, a chicken coop, a hog pen, but no animals in sight. The only sign of life was a thin plume of gray smoke rising from the chimney.

"Sheesh, where's Norman Rockwell when you need him?" Gary said, gunning the van up the rutted driveway. LeVoy stepped off the porch into the yard as the van crunched to a halt.

"Y'all can come in," he said, his breath a white cloud in the icy air, "he's in a fair mood today. Just be cool, okay?" He slid a pint of wine from under his sweater and passed it to Gary. "If he asks, you give this to him. But no weed, nothin' else, understand?"

"No problem," Gary said, "grab my guitar case will ya, Axton?" He scrambled out without waiting for a reply. Ax shrugged and followed, but bumped into Gary as he hesitated on the porch steps. A bloody hatchet was buried in a chopping block beside the front door, red stained feathers clinging to the blade.

"Organic McChicken," Ax said, "homestyle." Turco arched one brow, then trailed LeVoy into the house.

The living room was uncomfortably warm, a potbellied woodstove glowing against one wall, a box of firewood beside it, cheap Formica-topped table in the corner ringed by scarred wooden chairs. Tattered throw rugs were scattered about on the rough wood floor; the only decoration on the walls was a sepia waterstain shaped like Louisiana. A battered old V-shaped guitar stood in the corner leaning against a grubby Monkey Ward's amp. The room was deserted, but Ax sensed a presence in the darkened bedroom doorway, watching them.

"Y'all just stand around a minute," LeVoy said quietly. Ax scanned the barren room, looking for clues to the man who lived there. A worn leather belt was hanging from a peg behind the front door. A gunbelt, with an empty holster. Ax casually lowered Gary's guitar case to the floor, unzipped his jacket, and moved between Turco and the bedroom doorway. There was a soft snick of metal and Maurice Tyrone brushed the blanket aside and shuffled slowly out, dragging his left foot.

He looked like a dark prophet, a shattered giant of a man nearly a head taller than Axton's six

two. He was wearing a frayed workshirt, faded bib overalls, and a rumpled felt fedora on his nearly hairless skull. Below the hat's warped brim the left side of the old man's face had sagged like melted wax, reducing his eye to a slit, pulling his mouth into a permanent scowl. "Uncle Maurice," LeVoy said quietly, "I'd like you to meet some folks." He introduced Ax and Gary quickly, uneasily.

"Y'all got anything for me?" the old man rumbled, his voice rusty from disuse.

"Yes, sir," Gary said, "I thought we could have a taste—" Mojo took the bottle from him, twisted the cap off with his teeth and drained it "—together," Gary finished lamely.

"Got any more?" Mojo asked, tossing the empty bottle toward the bedroom door.

"No, sir," Gary said, "I'm afraid not."

"Next time bring one for yourself, boy. Don't like drinkin' alone. Got any weed?"

"Ah, no, sir," LeVoy said hastily, "they don't smoke. Big fans of yours, though. Came to hear you play."

"I use to do a lotta weed back when I was playin'," the old man said, cocking his head to examine Turco and Ax with his good eye. "Good stuff. Black Sheba, Lebanese, fine as country wine. Sure y' ain't got any?"

"No, but I brought my guitar," Gary said. "LeVoy tells me you still play."

"Play? Boy, I'm Mojo Tyrone. Devil hisself taught me to whup the blues 'fore you was born. B.B. King used to carry my bags, Albert Collins hoed my patch. Pop your case, white boy, let's see what you got."

Gary shed his leather trench-coat, knelt and took his guitar out of the case, a gleaming red Fender Stratocaster, its custom finish glowing like a bed of coals. He checked its tune, then plugged into Mojo's amp and ripped off a few flashy licks.

"That's a lotta notes, boy," Mojo growled. "What's the matter? You cain't find the right one?" He picked up his own guitar, eased down in a chair facing Gary. He carefully fitted a bottleneck over the ring finger of his crippled left hand, slid it up the strings. For a moment Ax thought the old man was moaning low in his throat, then he realized it was the guitar, murmuring softly, breathing between phrases like a vocalist. Singing. There was no other word for it.

Gary was staring, transfixed. "Well, boy," Mojo said, "you come to play, or jes' look?" Shaking his head ruefully, Gary flipped his pickup switch to bass and began punching out a rhythmic shuffle, a walking

Delta blues. The old man nodded along for a moment, then joined in, his guitar whining above Gary's rhythm like a hawk circling its prey. The music was uneven for a few moments, two street fighters sparring, testing each other, and then they found a groove, rock solid, and began to jam in earnest, their guitars meshing like gears in a rhythm machine. The music was crude, powerful stuff, sharp as home-brew whisky, and both men drank it deep, letting it take them over. LeVoy was lost in it, too, nodding to the beat, smiling as Turco and the old man worked through a medley of blues, changing tunes with only a look or a nod.

Casually Ax wandered over to the bedroom doorway, glanced inside. A rumpled cot against one wall, empty bottles scattered around. A candle was burning on a beside table, a black candle, lighting a framed picture of St. Michael and a neatly arranged pile of bones. He turned away, and met Mojo Tyrone's good eye, glaring at him fiercely from across the room. The old man stopped playing.

"What you lookin' for, cracker? You lookin' to steal from me? You'd best get some insurance on yourself."

"No, sir, nothing like that. I was just—"

"Playin's over anyway," Mojo said, putting his guitar aside. "Y'all got a bottle's worth. I want you gone."

"Show's over, folks," LeVoy said briskly, unplugging Gary's guitar, handing him his coat.

"Hey, wait a minute," Gary protested, "we were just getting warmed up."

"You remember the deal," LeVoy said firmly, glancing a warning at Ax, "it's time to go."

"You can come back sometime," Mojo said to Gary, "you don't play too bad for a white kid. Too many notes is all. Bring me another taste, maybe some reefer next time. But don't bring that cracker boy. I don't wanna see his ugly face again."

"Don't worry, Mr. Tyrone," Gary said, glaring at Ax, "you won't."

"Thanks, Axton," Gary snapped, as he threaded the van down the back country road away from Tyrone's shack, "you're supposed to protect my life, not screw it up."

"I was doing my job," Ax said. "There was a gunbelt hanging behind the front door, no gun in it. I thought maybe he left it in the bedroom."

"So the old guy lives alone, he keeps a gun around. So what?"

"That's just it, it wasn't around. I think he was packing it, and when a guy who's two bricks shy

of a load is carryin' a piece, I get nervous."

"Next time take a Valium."

"If you want to stay healthy, there shouldn't be a next time, Gary. Look, the old guy plays great guitar, but he's also more'n half nuts. He's got a voodoo altar in his bedroom, mojo bones and all. That stuff about the devil teaching him to play? I think he really believes it."

"Maybe he's right. Maybe he really is magic. I'm a pretty fair guitarist, and LeVoy's even better, but that old man's somethin' special. Walks like a stomped cockroach, but he plays . . . well, you heard him. It's like he went to hell and everything burned away but—truth. And that truth's gonna set me free."

"What do you mean?"

"Look, I've one big problem in getting my studio rolling. Me. I'm a hack, an over-the-hill glitter rocker. Nobody's gonna take me seriously as a producer. I need a gimmick. How's this? I bring Mojo Tyrone back from the dead to play on his nephew's first record."

"Are you serious?" Ax said. "You want to put him in a recording studio?"

"Hey, there may not be much juice left in that old man, but I'll squeeze out what there is. Give him a couple bottles of wine, he can play for an hour or two at a time. That should be enough."

Linnea can get us media coverage with the zombie-from-the-grave angle, and when people hear LeVoy and Mojo together, it'll knock their socks off."

"It's an interesting angle," Ax admitted, "but there's still a problem. With your reputation as a—showman, you can't just announce Mojo's on the album. The press'll figure it's a hoax."

"Okay, so we set up a few interviews—"

"You've gotta be kidding," Ax said. "Dammit, Gary, he was hiding in his bedroom with a gun when we came in. He belongs in a rest home, not at a press conference. What happens if he freaks, or maybe hurts somebody? Or would that just be more publicity?"

Gary didn't answer. He was eyeing the rear view mirror. Ax glanced over his shoulder. A black limo was a quarter mile or so behind them. And gaining. Gary floored the accelerator and the van leapt forward, rocketing down the narrow country road, swaying like a boat in heavy seas.

"Something wrong?" Ax asked, shifting in his seat to watch the limo.

"I hope not," Gary said coolly, concentrating on the wheel, "just being cautious."

"If this is cautious, what does crazy look like?"

"About the same," Gary

grinned. He ran the stop sign at the road's end, careened onto the fourlane on two wheels, then threaded the van through the traffic like an Indy 500 racer, and at nearly the same speed.

"You can cool it," Ax said, "you lost them."

"Probably nobody to lose," Gary said, slowing the van to the speed limit.

"Sure there was," Ax said, "and you know it. Why don't you quit shuckin' and tell me what's goin' on? We could've wound up dead in a ditch back there."

"Lighten up, Axton, no harm, no foul. And there are worse things than dying in a ditch."

"Like what?"

"Like getting old. Ending up like Mojo."

"I wouldn't worry about it," Ax said, "the way you're goin', Turco, you're never gonna get old."

““W

elcome to the new home of the hits, Young Turk Studios,” Turco said, stepping out of the fourth floor elevator, “what do you think?”

“Looks . . . busy,” Ax said. The office was semi-organized chaos, boxes of rack-mount recording equipment stacked to the ceilings, desks and filing cabinets still in plastic wrap. Linnea Harris, looking charmingly domestic in jeans and a T-shirt,

was taking inventory on a clipboard. Benjie gave them a nod, then trotted off carrying an armload of cases.

"Hi, guys," Turco said, shedding his coat, "how're we doing?"

"Good news, bad news," Linnea said. "The good news is Benjie thinks we can get the studio up and running this week. The bad news is, New York headquarters nixed LeVoy Tyrone as a prospect. They say blues is passé, want you to record pop groups more like your own."

"They can't do that," Gary said slowly.

"I'm afraid they can. Headquarters has final say on—"

"But dammit, I've got a sure-fire gimmick and LeVoy's too good to pass up! Those headquarters bean counters couldn't spot a hit group if one mooned 'em in church."

"They signed up your group," Linnea pointed out.

"Which proves my point," Gary shot back. "They only signed us because they counted the crowds and the gate receipts on our Canadian tour. Numbers is all they understand. So . . . maybe we can show 'em some numbers."

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe we can make 'em buy LeVoy the same way they bought me. Suppose we put on a concert, drum up some media coverage, and do a big gate. Make it a

charity bash for the homeless or something."

"Even charity concerts cost money," Linnea observed.

"We can pay for it with our development budget. We don't submit our accounts till the end of the month, that gives us three weeks to pull it off."

"Three weeks?"

"Lady, we're gonna be feeding the poor and bringing back a guy from the dead. If you can't drum up a crowd in three weeks for that, you're in the wrong business."

"I can get you some publicity all right, I'm just not sure I should. If you blow your whole budget on some charity concert, Magnus will cancel your contract."

"Maybe, but if LeVoy and Mojo hit as hard as I think they will, New York will not only okay our budget, they'll give us a free hand from now on. It's gut check time, Harris, you have to decide whose side you're on. How about it, you in or out?"

Linnea stared at him for a moment, frowning, then nodded slowly. "You're still the boss. For the moment, anyway. What about a concert hall? Can you hire one on such short notice?"

"I don't know," Gary said. "You know the local scene, Axton, what about it?"

"You can probably find a hall," Ax nodded, gazing out the window.

dow at the street below, "there are plenty of empty theaters in Detroit these days. Know what else there are?"

"What's that?"

"Lots of black limousines. One just pulled into the alley down there. Three guys getting out. Anybody you know, Gary?"

Turco stepped quickly to the window, glanced down, then shrugged. "I know them," he said, his face expressionless, "hey're okay."

"You sure? Looks like they're coming up. If you want me to stop 'em—"

"I said they're okay. Tell you what, why don't you take Linnea and try to book us a hall."

"You mean now?"

"Right now. The clock's running on this. Three weeks isn't much time, and you're the guy with local connections."

"And who covers your back while I'm finding a hall?"

"I'll be safe enough here. I need to get this place in shape anyway. Get crackin', okav?"

The Bubba Factor. Northerners often assume anybody with a southern accent is an inbred illiterate. As dimwitted as, say, Bubba Faulkner or Bubba Dickey. Unfortunately something about being alone in an elevator with Linnea Harris made Ax feel like a Bubba, big,

and battered, and as slow as lasses in January.

Too soon they were on the ground floor. The doors shushed open and they were facing the three men Ax had seen get out of the limo. Two of them, straight citizens in suits, ties, and over-coats, stepped into the elevator without a word. The third man, a square-faced blond giant in a bombardier's jacket, scar tissue on his brows above his mirrored shades, blocked the doorway.

"Hey, Ax," he said softly, "how you been doin'?"

"Swede," Axton nodded, "I'm breakin' even. You?" Neither man offered to shake hands.

"Flyin' high, like always. You workin' here, Ax?"

"Nah, just passin' through."

"Good," Swede nodded, "that's good. So I probably won't be seein' you around, right?"

"I hope not," Ax said.

"Yeah," Swede grinned. "Me too. Take care, Ax. See ya." The giant edged into the elevator, his eyes locked on Axton all the way.

"What was that all about?" Linnea said as she and Axton crossed the street to her BMW.

"I don't know who the two suits were," Ax said, "but the big guy was the Swede. We're in the same business, sort of, and since bustin' people up is his hobby, I think there's a fair chance he's the guy who stomped

Turco's bodyguard up in Toronto."

"What?" she said, stunned, "but—shouldn't you warn Gary?"

"Get real, Miss Harris, Gary knows who those guys are. I think he's known all along."

"I don't understand."

"Neither do I, but I'm going to. Here," he said, taking a small notebook out of his jacket pocket, jotting down an address, "you see the guy at this address, Gus Kakonis. He owns a theater called the Forum. Tell him I sent you and if I don't like the deal I'll be around to see him myself. I'll meet you back at the studio in a couple of hours."

"Where are you going?"

"To check some things out. Turco may think he knows what he's doing, but if he's mixed up with the Swede, he's liable to need the Forum to hold his own funeral. Or somebody's."

It was after dark before Ax made it back to the studio. Turco was sitting on the receptionist's desk, arms folded across his chest. Linnea Harris was checking her clipboard, looking uneasy.

"Place looks good," Ax said, glancing around, "you've been busy."

"No thanks to you," Turco said. "Where have you been?"

"Doing what you hired me for,

protecting you. Did some diggin', all part of the service."

"Yeah, well, I don't think I'm gonna be needing your services any more, Axton. You're off the clock as of now. Send me a bill."

"I see," Ax said slowly. "So you decided to do the right thing. It's probably best. You'll stay healthy longer."

"You been smokin' rope, Ax? You're babbling."

"Am I? I made a few calls today, found out the Swede is working for a couple of Canadian hard guys. Dopers. The two that were here today, right?"

"Wrong. I don't know any dopers, Axton, and who I see is none of your business, so hit the door, okay? We've got work to do."

"Fair enough, but let me give you some advice. You watch yourself around the Swede. The guy's like industrial pollution. People tend to get very sick in his vicinity."

"I'll keep it in mind."

"Do that. And one other thing. If you're serious about putting Mojo Tyrone onstage for your little shindig, there's something you'd better know. That near fatal stroke he had? It wasn't just old age and booze. He had it in the middle of a fight after a concert in Flint. Tangled with a kid over a dope deal, beat him nearly to death. If he'd been fit to stand trial he'd have done hard time. The rest home LeVoy mentioned

was a mental hospital, and Mojo was there nearly ten years. The old guy isn't just eccentric, Gary, he's stone crazy, and he probably always was."

"Everybody in this business is crazy, one way or another," Gary shrugged, "why should Mojo be any different?"

"Yeah, right," Axton snapped, "do me one favor, Turco. If this cockamamie concert of yours comes off, comp me some tickets, will ya? I wouldn't miss it for the world."

And that was that. Ax strode the mile or so back to his apartment, letting the night wind cool him off. He found another job waiting on his answering machine and spent the next ten days in Toledo chasing down a roadie who'd skipped with a soul revue's equipment. A tricky gig, the guy'd already traded some of the stuff for dope and Ax had to do some hardcase negotiating to get it back. By the time he returned to Detroit, he'd managed to put Linnea Harris completely out of his mind. For nearly twenty minutes at a time.

In Detroit it was harder to forget her because she was so very good at her job. The drumbeat of publicity for the concert was everywhere, carried as hard news in the entertainment sections of both the *News* and the *Free Press*. The *Chronicle* did a week

long retrospective on Detroit blues that painted Mojo Tyrone as a folk legend, a blues demigod the equal of Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters. FM rock stations were giving heavy airplay to the Turks' earlier albums, hyping the concert with give-away contests. WLLZ even dug out Mojo's only album and started playing "Hard Luck Man."

No one had actually *seen* Mojo, Gary was keeping him under wraps, no interviews, not even a photo op. And as the concert approached, the press was evenly divided on whether the original Mojo Tyrone really would appear or the whole thing was just a Gary Turco publicity stunt.

The day before the concert, two tickets arrived in Ax's mail, no note, just the tickets. Perfect. It gave him the chance to call Linnea to say thanks, and perhaps . . . but he didn't have to call her. He was in the middle of breakfast at the Greek's diner across the street from his office when Linnea Harris and Gary Turco walked in, spotted him, and came over.

"Hi, mind if we sit?" Turco said, slumping down into the booth without waiting for an answer. He looked rough, haggard, red-eyed, wired and wary as a wolf. Linnea looked tired too, her auburn hair in disarray, smudges under her eyes, but she

still looked better than anybody had a right to that early. He wondered if she always looked—

"We've got serious trouble," Turco said bluntly, "I want to hire you back."

"What kind of trouble?"

"You name it, we got it. Threatening phone calls, a wrecked studio, a torched car—"

"Hold it, slow down," Ax said, "run it by me from the top, okay?"

"Yeah, okay," Turco nodded, taking a deep breath. "We got the studio up and running a few days after you left—"

"After you fired me," Ax amended.

"Whatever," Gary shrugged. "Anyway, we've been recording nonstop since, damn near around the clock. It's been tough. Mojo can't remember arrangements worth a damn and he's definitely more'n a little strange to work with, but we still got some great tracks down. Nuts or not, that old man can flat smoke a guitar when he's in the mood, Ax. Workin' with him is like, I don't know, bein' eighteen again, havin' it all in front of me. But now it's—gone. We started getting threatening calls a week or so ago. Then last night somebody broke into the studio after we left, wrecked the place, destroyed the tapes. LeVoy's car was in the lot, it got torched."

"You call the cops?"

"Sure, for all the good it did," Turco flared. "They gave me a case number to give my insurance company and that was it."

"This is Motown," Ax said, "the law's stretched pretty thin. So what do you want me to do?"

"Find out who did this, or at least keep it from happening again. We've still got a chance to make this thing pay off if we tape the concert tomorrow night and get enough material to release on an album while Linn's still got the media pumped up about it. If we don't, everything we've got goes in the toilet. What do you say?"

"Sorry, not interested."

"Look, if you got another gig I'll double—"

"It's not the money," Ax said. "It's smoke, Gary. I'm allergic to it, and you're blowing it. I didn't hear you mention the Swede in your sad story."

"The Swede's got nothing to do with this."

"Bull," Ax said. "Just out of curiosity, I did a little more checking on my own time. Ran down the clowns that jumped us outside the Porkpie Hat. The Swede hired them. He also paid 'em to trash a certain apartment and add some instant artwork to the decor. Don't tell me he's not involved."

"That's—been settled," Gary said, "I took care of it."

"Maybe you think so, but if

you think I'm gonna mix it up with the Swede without knowin' the score, you're dreamin'. So either tell me what's going on or get somebody else."

"He can't get anyone else," Linnea put in, "LeVoy said unless you come back he and his uncle are out. They won't play."

"Thank you, ma'am," Ax said formally, "that's nice to know."

"Yeah, thanks a bunch," Turco snapped. "Whose side are you on, Harris?"

"My side," she said. "I've worked too damned hard to see this thing flushed because you're playing some private game. Let's have it, Gary, or I'm walking too. We've got a right to know."

Turco glanced from one to the other of them, then swallowed hard. "All right," he nodded, "I guess it doesn't matter. Unless the concert comes off, I'm finished anyway. I, ah, did a deal with the Swede in Canada. My big Canadian tour, the one that got me my new studio? It didn't really happen, or at least not the way people thought it did. On paper the Swede was listed as the promoter, but what he really did was pump up the gate, gave huge blocks of tickets away free, showed them on the books as receipts, which he claimed as legitimate profits."

"In other words, you laundered money for them?" Ax said. "My God."

"It was my last chance," Gary said simply, "the industry's shrinking, cutting out second-raters like me. My only chance for a deal was to show Magnus some big numbers."

"Whether they were real or not?"

"You know this business," Gary said, "if I produce a hit album, nobody will care how I got my studio. All they care about are results. The trouble was, my deal with Swede was supposed to be a one-shot thing, but it worked so well they wanted me to keep it up. Trashing my apartment and all the rest was his idea of friendly persuasion."

"So what makes you think he didn't trash the studio?"

"Simple," Gary sighed, "he's got no reason to any more. We had a little talk the day you left and I, uhm, agreed to do another tour for him as soon as I get my studio established. Told him we could set up the same laundering deal with the groups that record for me. He thinks everything's cool."

"You—bastard!" Linnea said, paling. "You mean you sold us out—"

"Hey, cool it. I'm no Boy Scout but I'm no doper either. I've already cut a deal with the Toronto authorities. When I go back to Canada, they'll bust the Swede and his buddies, I'll come

out looking like a hero, and he'll be off my back for good."

"Maybe," Ax nodded, "or maybe you'll end up dead."

"We all end up dead," Turco said evenly, "it's what happens in the meantime that counts, right? Point is, the Swede thinks things are okay. He didn't wreck my studio last night, he had no reason to."

"All right then, who did do it?"

"Hell, I don't know. What about LeVoy's father? He was dead set against it from the first."

"No," Ax said slowly, "I don't think so. Willis is a hard man in a hard trade, but he wouldn't cross up his son like this. If he wanted to derail things, he'd just have somebody bust you up. Any other candidates?"

"If I knew I wouldn't need you, Axton, I'd just tell the Swede and let him handle it. You're the one with the sign on his door that says investigations. You tell me."

"Maybe I can at that," Ax said, "but I'll have to do some checking."

"Aren't you going to tell him about Mojo, Gary?" Linnea put in. "Because if you don't, I will."

"What about Mojo?" Ax asked.

"Ahh, Linn thinks he might've done it. He, ah, he's been sleepin' in the studio storeroom, wan-

ders around a lot at night, you know, like old people do."

"Why is he sleeping in the storeroom?"

"Because he says he likes being with the instruments," Linnea said bluntly, "he says they sing him to sleep. Ax, he's crazy. When Gary and LeVoy went back to talk to him about recording, he was already packed, sitting there in the dark, waiting for them. Said he knew they'd come, that he called them back with his mojo bones. LeVoy and Gary have been able to jolly him along in the studio, but God only knows how he'll react at the concert."

"He'll be fine," Gary said, "you'll see. Like an old fire-horse—"

"Like an old meal ticket, you mean," Linnea snapped. "Dammit, Gary, you're just exploiting him."

"Maybe I am. But that doesn't make it wrong. You think he was better off in that old house, talkin' to the walls? Crazy or exploited or whatever, that old man's back doin' what he was put on this earth for. You're not a player, you don't understand. Ask Axton."

"Well?" Linnea said, turning to Ax, searching his face.

"I hate to admit it," he said, meeting her eyes, "but maybe Gary's right, maybe playing again will help the old man. I've

seen guys do shows who should've been in a hospital, or a morgue. That's why they call it Dr. Stage. But if it's any comfort to you, if Gary's wrong, and anything happens to Mojo or LeVoy, he'd better get his Blue Cross paid up because Willis Tyrone is damn sure gonna do him some serious damage. And maybe the rest of us, too. What about security guards for the concert? Who's handling it?"

"Mr. Kakonis recommended a local rent-a-cop company, Landau Security."

"Jack Landau's people will do fine for crowd control," Axton nodded. "As for your other problem, I'll do what I can. I'll see you at the concert if not before."

The Forum Theater was a wall to wall sellout, every seat on the main floor and the balconies filled a full forty minutes before showtime, standing room only. Jack Landau, the squat, bulldog head of security for the concert, should have been pleased when he'd closed the box office early, but he wasn't.

"It's an uneasy crowd," he told Turco in his dressing room backstage, where Gary was doing a last minute retouch of his makeup. Turco was in full heavy metal regalia, knee length red moccasins, spandex pants, studded black leather vest and

matching headband. "It feels more like a mob than an audience, half black, half white, lotta bikers and punk kids. Edgy vibes. I don't like it."

"Don't worry about the crowd," Gary said, "the show we've got planned oughta keep everybody happy. You just make sure security stays tight. How's Mojo holdin' up?"

"I've got a man on his door, just like you said," Landau said, "checks on him every few minutes. He's just sittin' there in the dark, waitin'. Weird."

"He's an artist—" Turco began. There were two quick raps on the door and Axton strode in.

"I think I've got a make on the guy who trashed the studio," he said, tossing a photo on Turco's dressing table. "This is the guy Mojo tangled with the night he had his stroke. Name's Cory Pollack. He was a smalltime pimp and a pusher. Apparently Mojo owed him serious bread for services rendered, tried to stiff him. Cops busted Pollack after the fight, caught him holding dope, he wound up doing six years hard time in Jackson."

"But that was a long time ago," Gary said, "why—"

"I traced him to a sleazebag rooming house out in Highland Park," Ax interrupted, "and ah, got into his room. Swastikas all over the place. He's a race hater. He also had clippings about the

concert and a poster on the wall, with Mojo's name slashed out. He's our man, Turco, and from what I've heard about him, he's real bad news."

"How old is this picture," Landau said, frowning at the photograph.

"I'm not sure," Axton said, "I lifted it from Pollack's place. From the cars in the background I'd guess it's ten years old or so, why?"

"I've seen this man," Landau said slowly, "not looking like this, though. Face is different. He's got a mustache now, maybe a beard."

"Get real," Turco snorted, "working the box office you must've seen five thousand faces in the last hour."

"I may be just a rent-a-cop," Landau said stiffly, "but I'm good at my job, and I'm telling you I've seen this guy tonight. Here. You'll have to stall the show until—"

"I'm not stalling anything!" Turco snapped. "Ax could be wrong about this Pollack character, but if I jerk this crowd around, we're damn sure gonna have a freakin' riot on our hands. This gig's going on just like it says on the program. Mojo won't be onstage till the finish, which gives you plenty of time to find Pollack, if he's here at all."

"I still think you ought to stall," Landau said.

"You've got your orders, Landau," Gary said, turning back to his mirror, "you do your job and let me do mine, okay?"

Landau snatched up the photograph and stalked out. Ax hesitated, then followed.

"He's right about one thing," Landau said in the hall outside, "this show better run on schedule. That's an ugly crowd out front. Why don't you get up in the light rigging over the stage. You'll be able to check out most of the crowd on the main floor from there. I'll take the balcony. I've got a man posted at the old man's dressing room, so he's safe for now. With luck we'll turn this guy up before Mojo goes on. If you spot Pollack, don't try anything on your own. I'll take care of him, understand?"

"What if we can't find him?" Axton said.

"Then you and me are gonna lock Mojo in his dressing room, riot or no riot. I'm not going to take the chance of putting him onstage with some wacko loose."

"Fair enough," Ax nodded, "good hunting."

Landau strode off. Ax jogged up the concrete stairway to the stage and scrambled up the metal ladder set in the wall. Up, up into the darkness high above the audience, to the catwalk used for servicing the spotlights. Swaying in space only a few feet

beneath the vaulted ceiling, he had an excellent view of the theater's main floor. Nearly every seat was filled, and he began scanning the rows, a face at a time, starting at the rear and working his way down. He was only half finished when the house lights began to dim and a Detroit FM jock came on to rev up the crowd and announce LeVoy Tyrone as the opening act. The response was mixed, mild applause from the white punkers who'd come to see Turco and the Turks, an enthusiastic roar from the blacks in the audience, with most of the noise coming from the front row center, a block of seats occupied by Willis Tyrone and what seemed to be a small army of his cronies, most of them gangbangers from the look of them. If Willis hadn't come looking for trouble, he was definitely ready for it. Ax closed his eyes for a few moments to let them adjust to the dim lighting out front, then began scanning the crowd again.

It was a slow, painful process. Despite the no smoking signs the air was a hazy, heady smog of tobacco and reefer. Axton's eyes were burning, watering, but still he continued, squinting into the fog, forcing himself to focus on each face row by row. Nothing. He hesitated now and again, concentrating intently on faces that resembled the man in

the photograph, but rejected each one and moved on.

On the stage forty feet below, LeVoy Tyrone, dressed in a retro-styled gleaming white tuxedo, opened the show, cranking out a blistering uptempo set of urban blues and jazz-tinged ghetto soul. His icepick sharp guitar work won over the rockers in the audience and gradually began to unify the crowd and make it his own. He finished to a huge round of applause, did a brief encore, then gave up the stage to Gary Turco and the Turks.

In the rigging overhead, Axton had scanned through two-thirds of the crowd, but when Turco began his set, some of the punkers scrambled out into the aisle and rushed the stage, mobbing up beneath the footlights. Cursing, Ax tried to search the faces directly below. If Pollack was here, the mob near the stage would be perfect cover.

Impossible. Turco was showboating, strutting around the stage, and the crowd was swarming back and forth, aping him, dancing, shouting along with the lyrics, working themselves into a heavy metal frenzy. Ax could only catch momentary glimpses of the faces below. Perhaps between songs . . . He spotted LeVoy standing in the wings, digging the show, waiting to be called back on for the finish.

Then he caught a flash of a uniform at the edge of the crowd. Landau was pushing his way through the mob to the stage, squirming through the bodies like a dinosaur in a tar pit. He gestured frantically at Ax, waving him down.

Ax clambered down the metal ladder to the stage wings just as Landau burst out of the crowd at the stage steps. The security chief was red-faced, exhausted, his uniform a shambles.

"What's wrong?" Ax yelled over the amplified roar from the stage. "Did you spot him?"

"No," Landau gasped, "he's not out here. I remembered where I saw him. The parking lot. He's working as an attendant. He's in uniform."

Ax bulled past him, sprinting down the steps to the dressing room corridor. Deserted. Everyone was up watching the show, and there was no guard on Mojo's door. Ax hammered on the door. No response.

"Where the hell's your man?" he yelled at Landau, trying the door. Locked.

"I don't know. Cornell's a good man, dammit! He wouldn't—"

Axton reared back and kicked at the doorlatch, smashing it in, and charged into the shambles of a room. And stopped. Mojo Tyrone had Cory Pollack pinned to the wall, his powerful right hand clamped around Pollack's

throat, his face a carved mask of dark fury, teeth bared, eyes rolled back, his arm quivering like a high tension wire, holding Pollack a full six inches above the floor. Pollack's face was bluish, his tongue lolling, eyes sightless. Only his boots showed any life, thudding reflexively against the wall.

"Mojo! Let him go!" Ax roared. "You're killing him!"

No response. Mojo didn't even look up. Ax grabbed his arm, trying to break him away from Pollack's throat, couldn't budge it. It was like wrestling with a tree. Landau seized the old man from behind in a bear hug, pulling him off. Axton caught Pollack's body as it slumped to the floor.

"He cheated me," Mojo panted, his chest heaving, "long time ago. Shouldna come back." He staggered over to his dressing table and slumped against it, exhausted. Axton pressed his fingertips against Pollack's throat. No pulse.

"Get an ambulance!" he shouted at Landau. The security chief nodded and sprinted out the door. Thunder rolled through the building as Turco finished his set. Axton tilted Pollack's head back to clear his airway, then pressed his mouth to the dead man's. He exhaled forcefully, twice, filling Pollack's lungs. No response. The roar

from the stage made it impossible to hear a breath or a heartbeat. Axton's universe shrunk to the size of Pollack's face, pinching the dead man's nostrils, filling his lungs, waiting, then trying again. At some point Mojo stood up, groped through the wreckage, and found his crumpled fedora and his guitar.

"Siddown!" Ax gasped between breaths, "You're not going any place!"

"They announcin' me," Mojo said, swaying unsteadily, "I'm on. Got to go."

"Dammit!" Ax grabbed at the old man as he staggered past, couldn't hold him. Then Pollack twitched convulsively and Ax forgot about Mojo, forgot about everything but breathing for Pollack, bringing him back to life. Pollack coughed explosively, then gasped his first breath on his own. Ax sat back, panting as Landau stormed back into the room.

"Ambulance is on the way, cops too," Landau panted, "still can't find my man Cornell. Where's Mojo?"

"I don't know," Ax said, "he walked outa here a minute ago headed for the stage."

"Jesus, that old man's really somethin', ain't he? Took this creep one on one and half killed him. Maybe there's somethin' to that voodoo stuff he sings about."

"Maybe," Ax nodded, getting

to his feet, "but I think I'd better check on him. You keep this piece of garbage here for the medics and the cops."

As Axton ran down the corridor toward the stage he could hear Gary Turco's voice booming over the p.a. system, ranting about a seventh son of a seventh son who could deal with the devil and raise the dead.

The stairway up to the wings was blocked by a cluster of stagehands and roadies who'd gathered to catch the last set. Ax caught a glimpse of Mojo's fedora moving through the mob, but couldn't get to him. By the time he shouldered his way through the crowd, Mojo was already shuffling out to the center of the stage, dragging his left foot, his battered old guitar clutched under his good arm. The old man was disheveled from his struggle with Pollack, his necktie askew, suit rumpled, the melted mask of his face gleaming with perspiration. Only his eyes seemed alive, energized by the lights and the noise and the smell of the crowd.

Gary gave Mojo a buildup, saying anyone who loved rock'n'roll owed everything to Mojo and bluesmen like him, players who invented it all, then just faded away, squeezed out by the system or broken by the life. His intensity took both Ax and the audience by surprise. Either

Gary believed what he was saying or he'd been watching a lot of Sunday morning TV. Still, he didn't belabor the point. The audience was still wired from the Turks' heavy metal show, and when he sensed their impatience he cut his sermon, announced Mojo's first song, and strode offstage into the wings.

"What the hell happened to Mojo?" he snapped at Axton. "I paid six hundred bucks for that suit—"

"He tangled with Pollack backstage, almost killed him. The police are on their way. They'll want to talk to him."

"No problem, he's only doing one number," Turco said, "he'll be off in a few . . ." Gary's voice trailed off as he glanced back at Mojo. The old man was still standing alone in the center of the stage, staring up into the spotlights, dazed, transfixed. The crowd was growing restless, shuffling their feet, a few scattered catcalls. "My God," Gary said softly, "he's frozen. Dammit, that's all I need—"

But before Turco could move, Mojo seemed to snap out of it.

"HOW Y'ALL DOIN'?" he roared into the microphone, startling the crowd to silence. "I ain't doin' so good. I been dead. Lotta years . . ." He frowned, his voice fading as his train of thought derailed. "Lotta years . . ." he repeated. He

plucked at his guitar strings fitfully, discordant twanks, as though the instrument could help him recall where he was.

Standing at the rear of the stage with the backup band, LeVoy shot Turco a look of sheer panic, then stalked over. "What's wrong with him?" he hissed. "He's freakin' on us. He'll blow everything."

"DEAD!" Mojo shouted, "they stuck me away in a—place by myself, no woman, nobody, a dead man for sure. But I fooled y'all. I used my bones, and I called myself back . . ." He trailed off again, closed his eyes.

In the midst of the restless crowd, a solitary pair of hands began clapping. Willis Tyrone rose, applauding, glaring fiercely about, daring anyone to remain seated. His street gang entourage rose as well, joined prudently by everyone seated near them in an ovation that spread raggedly around the room. Much of the applause was sarcasm, white punkers who were convinced now that the whole thing was a Turco put-on, sending some old wino out to babble.

"Go for it, Pops! Right on, right on!" Mojo nodded and grinned at the crowd, accepting the ovation, drinking it in like a willow in a warm rain.

"Dammit, Gary," LeVoy said, "they're laughing at him. This

is wrong, man. Now either get him off, or I will."

"Thank you! I thank y'all!" Mojo swept off his fedora, bowed grandly, lurched and almost fell, a comic turn that brought a roar of approval from the crowd. He straightened slowly, his ebon face gleaming with perspiration in the spotlights. "I'm back," he growled softly, as if to himself, "I come back from hell to jam one more time." He tapped his foot slowly and began to pick, his guitar whining softly, like a woman crying in her sleep.

"What's he doing?" Turco said desperately. "That's not the song we rehearsed—"

"I think it's the old intro to 'Hard Luck Blues,'" LeVoy snapped. "My God, he's on autopilot. He thinks he's closing his old set." LeVoy sprinted back onstage, grabbed his guitar, and whirled to face the band. "Key of E," he said quietly, "blues changes, hard shuffle. Kick in when he hits the turnaround." He gave them a silent count, three fingers and a clenched fist. They came in raggedly, but together, tightening up after two bars into a rock solid rhythm. Mojo picked up on it, nodding to the beat, melding with it, and began to cook harder, with more energy, playing like a man in a fever.

Four straight choruses, then five, the tempo gradually in-

creasing, Mojo's guitar growling fiercely with a familiar jubilation, freed from its cage. The audience didn't respond at first, baffled by the turnabout. But the old man gradually won them over, blowing them away with his raw energy, his half-crazed passion. Gary Turco strode on stage, picked up his guitar, and joined in, playing rhythm with the band. The music was crude, unpolished, but it was the real thing, steelyard hard, irresistible.

Mojo sang a couple of verses, shouting into the lights, eyes closed, sweat streaming, burning off twenty years of frustration, a lifetime of rage. LeVoy and Gary moved forward, flanking Mojo at the mike, jamming in the background beneath the old man's voice, dueling, a musical skirmish that broke into open warfare when Mojo came back in on guitar.

Three players, from different eras, different worlds, each playing at top form, forcing the others to raise the level of their games, to cook harder with every chorus or be blown out by the talent of the other two.

The song was pure energy now, art on another plane, transmuted, breathing on its own, a thirty chorus nonstop marathon, full tilt boogie on the edge of chaos. The audience was magnifying the electricity, on

their feet, shouting, whistling, absorbing the intensity from the stage, reflecting it back five thousandfold. Twenty minutes thundered past, twenty-five, and then Mojo suddenly shattered the magic.

He quit in the middle of a chorus and stepped away from the mike, halting the backup musicians with a slashing motion across his throat, hammering on his guitar like a judge calling for order.

A moment's stunned silence, LeVoy, Gary, Mojo, eyeing each other warily, panting, sweat-slick fighters between rounds, the crowd forgotten. Until the audience erupted in an ovation, a foot-stomping, howling roar for an encore. Mojo stood there in the lights, swaying in the noise like a willow in a gale. Then he slowly turned to Gary. "You warm yet, white boy? Show 'em what you got."

Gary nodded gamely, took a ragged breath, and stepped forward. He began with the signature riff to the song, playing it slowly at first, then increasing the speed, bending it, dancing it all over the guitar neck, blurring it into a cascade of fingertapping heavy metal pyrotechnics. Ax had heard Turco before but never like this. He was playing so far over his head he should have been levitating. The audience responded with a

roar of approval when he finished, but Gary didn't seem to notice. He was watching Mojo. The old man met his stare eye to eye, then shook his head slowly.

"You don't listen worth a damn, do ya? I told you that first day you usin' too many notes. You don't need all them notes, you just need a few, or maybe just one. The right one."

Mojo struck a single note, a bell tone low on the neck, then turned away from the crowd to face the wall of amplifiers behind him, holding the note, letting it ring, sustaining it, letting feedback from the amps build it into a hum, then a howl. Eyes closed, his dark suit sweat-drenched, the old man slowly raised his battered guitar over his head with his numbed arm, shifting it gently, each movement altering the note, making it soar, swoop, even trill, the guitar singing in its own voice, a virtuoso display of talent and craft. Or magic.

Ax was as transfixed as anyone in the audience, perhaps more so since he understood the technical difficulty of what Mojo was doing. He scarcely noticed when Landau shouldered through the crowd to his side.

"The cops are here. They've got Pollack in custody, wanna talk to Mojo."

"He's easy to find. He's on-

stage takin' care of business in front of five thousand witnesses."

"Is he okay?"

"I'd say so. He's spent the last half hour blowin' away two guitar heroes young enough to be his grandkids. Why?"

"We found Cornell, the guy I had on Mojo's door," Landau said grimly. "He's dead, stuffed in a broom closet. Pollack knifed him with an ice-pick. I found the shiv in Mojo's room."

"God, Jack, that's hard," Ax said, "you sure it was—"

"It was Pollack all right. Bastard even has blood on him."

"Where was the blood?" Ax frowned. "Which hand?"

"Which hand? His right, why?"

"Because Mojo's numb on his left side," Ax said slowly.

"But if he'd been stabbed . . ."

"He might not feel it," Ax snapped. "He looks okay, but—dammit, I can't see anything from here. I'll try the other wing. You catch him if he comes off this way, make sure he's okay."

Axton strode slowly to the opposite wing, keeping to the shadows at the rear of the stage, trying to get a closer look at Mojo as he crossed. In the center of the stage Mojo was winding down his one note solo, gradually turning to face the crowd again, lowering his guitar, letting the feedback dwindle away

to stone silence that lasted a dozen heartbeats before the stunned audience reacted with a roar of approval that dwarfed the applause Turco'd gotten earlier. Nodding regally, Mojo dismissed the applause with a casual wave, then turned to LeVoy.

"How 'bout you, boy? You got anything left?"

LeVoy shook his head slowly, glowering at his uncle with mock resentment. Then he nodded and mimicked Mojo's move, raising his guitar over his head. For a moment Ax thought he was going to attempt to match the old man's feat, but he didn't. Instead he flipped his guitar up into the lights, caught it by the neck as it fell, and smashed it into kindling on the stage, a three thousand dollar salute to a better player.

A master stroke. The audience erupted again, laughter and cheers mixed into applause that equalled Mojo's ovation. The old man nudged the wreckage of LeVoy's guitar with his lamed foot, shaking his head. Then he tossed his battered old guitar to his nephew, turned and limped slowly offstage, waving his fedora to the crowd. The band kicked in, reprising "Hard Luck Blues," some traveling music for an old warrior.

Axton met Mojo halfway to the wings, taking his arm, of-

fering his shoulder for support.
"Are you okay, sir?"

"Jus' fine, cracker boy, fine as wine. A little tired."

"You're entitled," Ax said, relieved. "Mr. Tyrone, that was the goddamnedest show I've ever seen."

"Yeah," Mojo nodded, "it was, wadn't it? LeVoy got me, though, there at the end. Topped my one note, got hisself a big hand with no note at all. Boy's gonna be somethin', you watch. You got a drink on you?"

"No, sir, but I believe I can find you one. We have to go backstage now, some people want to talk to you."

"Sure," Mojo nodded, leaning against Axton, "anything you say."

Onstage, Gary and LeVoy closed the set, exchanging riffs but without the earlier competitive intensity. The old man had stolen the show and they both knew it. They got a five minute standing ovation at the finish, and Gary took the opportunity to plug the live album of the show soon to be released on his new label. Still the applause continued.

"Hell, LeVoy," Turco said, "tell somebody to get Mojo back onstage or we'll be here all damn night."

"I'll get him," LeVoy grinned, "my pleasure. Give the album another plug, I'll be right back."

He was halfway to the wings before he realized that his white jacket was a ruin, spattered with blood from the back of Mojo's guitar.

It was nearly five A.M. before the police finished with them. Axton, Linn Harris, and Gary left the theater together, exhausted from the show and the marathon interrogation afterwards. Gary was unlocking the van when the door opened and half dozen street gang hoods clambered out of it, joined by others from the shadows of the parking ramp, ringing them in without a word, blades and chains showing in the dull glow of the overhead fluorescents. Ax didn't bother reaching for his weapon. Willis Tyrone stepped into the ring, hands thrust deep in his overcoat pockets, his face an ebon mask, eyes dead as ice, unreadable.

"So," he said quietly, "y'all enjoy the show? Have a good time?"

"Mr. Tyrone," Ax said, stepping in front of Linn and Gary, "I know you're hurtin'—"

"You're damn right I am, Ax, but that's not why I'm here. This is business. When your white punk boss talked my boy into this, I said anything happened, he'd pay the cost. I just come from the hospital. Mojo's goin' down slow, they don't figure

he'll see the mornin'. So why don't you and the lady just walk away, Ax. I'll send a couple men along, make sure you're safe. Motown's a hard place late at night. Turco here's 'bout to find that out."

"The lady can leave, but not me," Ax said, "I'm staying."

"You better understand somethin', Axton," Willis snapped, "you got no leverage here, you're nothin' to me. You want to buy into what your boss gets, fine—"

"Go on, Ax," Gary interjected, "take Linnea and split. I'll be all right. Mr. Tyrone's been wrong from day one, I'mbettin' he's wrong again."

"What's that supposed to mean, Turco? What you figure I was wrong about?"

"Everything. For openers you figured I was runnin' a shuck when I said I could make your boy a star, but after the concert tonight, he's on his way. LeVoy's gonna be as hot as Hendrix after Monterey."

"And what happened to Mojo, that's just tough, right?"

"You're damned right it's tough. But what you did to him was worse. You thought you were doin' him a favor, taking care of him all these years. If you'd let him be, he would have had to play to stay alive, and that's what he should have been doin' all along. You saw how he

was on that stage tonight. He was magic! He was where he belonged. And even if he dies for it, it was worth it. He'd tell you so himself."

"Maybe," Willis said, "maybe he would. But he can't tell me, can he? The only one talkin' now is you, white boy."

"Yeah, well, that's just one more thing you're wrong about. That old man isn't gonna die. I don't care what the doctors say, anybody that can play like he did tonight is gonna live forever. You want to take me for a ride, fine. Why don't we drive back to the hospital, wait for Mojo to wake up in the morning. When he does I'll tell him he has to shape up because we've gotta tour behind our album, a hundred, maybe a hundred and twenty one-nighters in a row. He's not only gonna make it through the night, he's gonna be draggin' himself outa that place in a week. I'll bet my life on it."

"Fair enough," Willis nodded slowly, "I'll take the bet. We'll take that ride to the hospital, but I'm warnin' you up front, if Mojo checks out, you gonna be checkin' in. I'll say one thing for you, Turco, you got sand."

"Oh, I'm scared," Gary shrugged, "but not of you. You know what scares me, Mr. Tyrone? I been playin' since I was a kid, and tonight I played better'n I ever have in my life, and

that half dead old man still blew me away. If I go on tour with Mojo, you won't have to do me in, I'll probably die of embarrassment."

"Right now, sonny, I'd say embarrassment's the least of your problems, you know? Let's go."

"Why not?" Gary nodded. He flipped Ax and Linnea a mock salute, then walked off with Willis. A half dozen of Willis's gangbangers closed in behind him, and the group faded into the shadows of the parking ramp as though they'd never been there.

"Will he be all right?" Linnea asked.

"I think so. If Mojo doesn't make it, Willis might rough Gary up some, which he's probably got comin', but if I thought he was in real danger, I'd do

something about it. Still, we better get over to the hospital, keep an eye on things. I've got to make a delivery anyway."

"A delivery?"

"The black candle and the bones from Mojo's dressing room. I think he oughta have 'em when he wakes up."

"But surely you don't believe in—all that?"

"Nah, of course not. On the other hand, after seein' the show that old man put on tonight, I think I'll get some mojo bones of my own, just to be on the safe side."

"You know, Mister Axton, with that face of yours, it's hard to tell when you're kidding."

"Yes, ma'am, I expect it is. Maybe you just need more practice. And call me Ax. Everybody does."

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UNSOLVED

by
Ken Weber

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The oldest of the three men stopped pacing—actually prancing—and planted himself in front of Christopher Watson's desk. He shook an accusing finger at Christopher and harped in a high-pitched voice. "I don't care! I get half! That's all there's to it! And I'm taking half, too! If you don't get that mechanic person over here and start cutting the Pierce Arrow in half, then I'm going to do it myself!" He humped righteously and sat down, and then gripping his knees with his hands and holding his back straight, began tapping his feet on the floor.

"Half!" he repeated. "By four o'clock today!"

His place in front of Christopher's desk was immediately taken by the second man. This one was Willard Glebemount. He was even more strident than his older brother, Chauncey.

"If you dare... if you *dare!*" Willard sputtered a lot, and bounced while he talked. "So help me, I'll sue. I'll sue. And you'll never work again. If you let anyone go near any of the cars, I'll... I'll..." Willard's threat, whatever it was, got lost in a combination of chokes and sputters. He sat down to collect himself.

There was a second or two before the third man spoke from a reclining position in his chair. Christopher could not really tell if he had been drinking or not.

"Mr. Watson—Christopher." Alistair Glebemount, the youngest of the three Glebemount heirs, was also the calmest, but then, as Christopher's predecessor had advised him only two days before, no one had ever seen Alistair sober, so it was difficult to conclude that the calm was natural.

"Christopher, why don't you just go ahead and call the man with the cutting torch? It's a simple tradeoff. One of my brothers will be apoplectic; the other will be appeased. I, meanwhile," he continued, crossing his legs with a show of languor, "could not care less what you do."

"Not the Pierce Arrow, you good-for-nothing!" Willard had recovered himself and launched into Alistair. "If you put a scratch on Papa's best car, I'll . . . I'll . . ."

It seemed to Christopher that whatever Willard intended, he'd never ever be able to tell anyone first.

"Gentlemen!" He had to break the cycle, for out of the corner of his eye, he saw Chauncey had been gathering steam again. "Gentlemen, tea is being served in the library. I will join you there in fifteen minutes with the solution to this dilemma. Could you please . . ."

Alistair got up and left before Christopher finished. Chauncey and Willard fenced only briefly at the doorway over who would leave first, so Christopher soon had peace in his office.

He sat down wearily, reflecting on the major drawback that accompanied the role of the most junior partner in Alliston, Aubrey & Wickum. A great firm, he thought. He and his classmates had competed vigorously for this position, but on a day like today he wondered whether it was truly worth the big salary and the prestige. Christopher's responsibility, until the next junior was added to the firm, was to administer the vast Glebemount estate. Most of his efforts were devoted to overseeing the whims, jealousies, and chronic bickerings of the three Glebemount bachelor brothers.

To compound the bad luck, Christopher had acquired this portfolio at a watershed point. Papa Glebemount's will decreed that by four o'clock this afternoon his seventeen cars were to be distributed among his three sons precisely as follows: to the eldest son, Chauncey, one-half of the cars; to the middle son, Willard, one-third of the cars; to Alistair, the youngest, one-ninth.

It hadn't taken any great insight on Christopher's part to deduce just why the Glebemount brothers had turned out as they did. Papa's will was full of this kind of thing. It was guaranteed to keep his boys at one another's throats for life. The division of the seventeen cars into these impossible fractions was just one more thorn in everyone's side.

His office door opened immediately after a short, swift knock: It was the senior assistant to Noel Wickum himself, the unflappable Mrs. Bayles. She was flapped.

"Mr. Watson, the library! They're having an awful row! You must come!"

Christopher ran down the hall after Mrs. Bayles and just missed knocking her over when she came to an abrupt halt well outside

the library door. They had arrived in time to hear Alistair tell Willard he wanted the hood ornament and grille of the Pierce Arrow for his one-ninth, and that once he had control of these pieces he was going to spray-paint them in fluorescent yellow. By the time Christopher opened the door, Willard was sputtering and Chauncey was prancing in his chair again.

"Gentlemen!" He was surprised at how readily they gave him their attention. "I have a solution. Please come to the parking lot."

They filed into the elevator, and although Christopher had reason to be tense, nothing more untoward happened than Willard's insistence on facing the wall and, of course, Chauncey's incessant prancing. He pranced them all right out the door and into the parking lot, where the gleaming chrome faces of seventeen classic automobiles seemed to be enjoying the scene in a wicked sort of way.

Christopher had parked them himself the previous night, side by side in the empty lot, relishing the time behind the steering wheel of each one. There were two Packards, a La Salle, a custom-made eight-seater Hudson . . . The list went on.

And of course, there was the Pierce Arrow. Chauncey pranced over to it in doubletime.

"Mine! mine!" He danced around it and then, with a cackle at his brother, added, "This half!"

"No . . . no . . . Papa's nice . . . I'll . . ." Willard was beside himself.

Alistair chuckled.

"Gentlemen." Christopher was beginning to feel like an announcer. "My solution. Please wait here. I have a present for Papa Glebemount's estate which, as administrator, I cheerfully accept."

While the three brothers eyed him with silent suspicion, he sprinted across the lot to his somewhat battered but loyal Toyota. He quickly drove it to the end of the Glebemount lineup and parked it there, in sharp contrast to the highly polished 1936 Chrysler Air-Flow that up to now had been car number seventeen. The brothers were unusually still.

"The Glebemount estate cars now number eighteen." For the first time, Christopher felt he had a bit of control over things. "You, Mr. Chauncey, may have your half without any cutting now. That should please you, Mr. Willard; your one-third can even include the Pierce Arrow. It should not make any difference, since only

Mr. Alistair drives in any case. And Mr. Alistair, you surely would not want the little Toyota as part of your one-ninth, so since it's left over, I'll continue to use it in my role as administrator. That is, of course, unless one of you would prefer to have it in your share and perhaps leave me a Packard?"

Can you explain Christopher Watson's math? How did he manage to satisfy the Glebemount will without cutting up any of the cars, especially the Pierce Arrow, and still have a car for himself?

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And Down She Lay

by Jeffry Scott

In dour moments his face resembled a section of cliff with frozen water trapped in a couple of crannies, reflecting an unpromising sky—those were the eyes. Nobody had ever accused Detective-Sergeant Dick Flinders of being an impressionable man.

Yet he liked Mary Taylor a lot, from the instant of meeting her, and eventually—on his side, at least—it went far beyond that. Secretly, Flinders thought her beautiful, though Mrs. Taylor was no great beauty.

She had the face of a Renaissance madonna, twenty years on, more than a touch overweight, who had lived through some hard times. She was a no-nonsense woman who generally wore flat shoes, crumpled pants and sweater, and a camelcloth coat with a faintly mangy air because its raised seams showed threadbare places. At the same time, Mary Taylor managed to be intensely feminine.

Operation Nail ran for months, so Flinders and Detective-Sergeant Taylor spent a total of days together.

From time to time a criminal gets target status, to be watched around the clock, his life analyzed in finest detail, every human contact logged and checked out, so that a picture of his activities can be built up. The subject of Operation Nail presented extra problems because he had one or more bent coppers on his payroll for the sole purpose of warning him about such interest. The special force recruited for Nail, therefore, was gathered by stealth and assembled under subterfuge, from all over the Metropolitan Police area.

Dick Flinders, for instance, left Rosetta Street nick on extended sick leave. As usual, he said nothing about it, but somebody left a confidential letter on the wrong desk, and it soon became public knowledge that a patch had been discovered on his lung; he was going to stay with relatives at the seaside and wouldn't be back for a long time. Mary Taylor was sent to a pilot course in social studies at a Midlands university, and so it went for the thirty or more members of the team.



"YOU LOOK AFTER YOURSELF." THEN SHE TURNED UP THE COLLAR OF THE DISREPUTABLE COAT AND TRUDGED OFF TO THE BUS STOP.

ALFRED HITCHCOCK
mystery magazine March 1991

You can do a lot of talking while watching. Dick Flinders, of course, was more of a listener. And that was a rainy summer, even for England. Afterwards, Flinders' mental pictures of Mary were of sitting with her in a string of drab cars and anonymous pickups and light trucks, with worm and amoeba patterns of rain on the window behind her profile.

She was a great one for poetry, the older, unfashionable kind that rhymes and scans. She could recite more than Flinders had ever bothered to read, and Tennyson was her favorite. Mary reeled off even the longer poems with only occasional pauses, as if telling a story. He never minded when she repeated them, and the couplets, drawing extra potency from their speaker, sank into his subconscious, ripe for retrieval.

And she talked about her youth, the sky-wide fields of Wiltshire where tractors work in threes and fours and racehorses exercise on the emerald, frozen waves of downland hills. The recollections stopped around her twentieth birthday.

Flinders gathered or guessed that her marriage, while enduring—she wasn't the kind to break a contract—wasn't a success.

Naturally, they also talked shop by the hour. At the time of Operation Nail, a detective-constable had been murdered at Roth-erhithe. He was a man with a heavy caseload and an even heavier list of enemies, so there were many suspects.

"I'd always leave a clue," said Mary Taylor.

"Chances are it would be a fine thing. Ted Perry had other things on his mind, poor sod. They ran him down with a five-ton truck, luv—there wasn't time for a dying deposition."

She shook her head. "There's ways, Dick. I bet I'd find one." Mary could be very certain about professional matters, or pigheaded, if you wanted to be unkind.

There was a big celebration when Operation Nail, having run like clockwork, delivered like a fruit machine. Detective-Sergeant Flinders, impassive as ever, was probably the only officer involved who felt sad.

He and Mary slipped away from the pub after the third hour of euphoria. Inspector Flaxman, who was that sort, was showing people an Operation Nail tie he had designed. Superintendent Jelliffe, primmest and stuffiest of coppers, was wearing a lampshade.

"I'll run you home," Flinders offered. Mary Taylor lived on the Kent side of London, not many miles beyond Rosetta Street and his lodgings.

She shook her head. "Not a good idea. Well, is it?"

Flinders found a kind of eloquence. "Probably be years before we get together again. I think the world of you, gel. Your circumstances may change; mine won't, there aren't any. So if you ever want to get in touch, you know where I am."

"You're a gentleman, Dick."

"Oh-aye, one of nature's," he scoffed, glad to lighten the atmosphere.

Mary Taylor always said what she meant, and took mild exception when others fell short of that. "Just a gentleman." Her stubby, worn, and capable hand, a moth in the darkness of the car park, came up and settled on his shoulder and squeezed hard for a moment. "You look after yourself."

Then she turned up the collar of the disreputable coat, freeing her hair with an abrupt shake of the head that put him in mind of a pony, yanked the belt tighter, and trudged off to the bus stop.

It was the last he saw of her. But two years afterwards he heard about Detective-Sergeant Mary Taylor.

"What exactly is your interest?" Inspector Mockridge returned Flinders' warrant card and leaned back behind his desk, a man with the deceptive, florid jollity of high blood pressure and a short temper.

"I worked with DS Taylor on a target thing, backalong. And being in the neighborhood anyway, sir, I wanted to know what happened. Maybe I can call on the family."

"There isn't one to speak of," Mockridge countered promptly. "Just Mr. Taylor, and I've already seen him. There are procedures for an, um, unhappy matter like this, sergeant. All being taken care of. Mr. Taylor never liked his wife's career, he's upset, and he won't take kindly to a stream of coppers banging at his door."

The big man waited woodenly.

Inspector Mockridge, spying a corner of newspaper protruding from the trenchcoat pocket, smiled narrowly. "You ought to know better, taking any notice of the papers. Typical media distortion. There's no mystery about Taylor's death: she was spring cleaning and fell off a chair, broke her neck."

Mockridge's smile grew a fraction malicious. "Not the domesticated type, DS Taylor—didn't like women's work."

"Thanks, sir. I'll be on my way, then." But Detective-Sergeant Flinders did not travel far.

* * *

"Oh, you're in order, Dick." Sergeant Rollason, bluff, sandy, matter-of-fact, nodded to himself. "One of our lot dies with their boots on, you start thinking the worst."

Flinders had waited three hours in the Bull & Mouth, sipping light ale at an unvarying rate of a pint every sixty-five minutes, to encounter Rollason. The Bull wasn't the nearest pub to Caldwell Green police station, just the best. And Dick Flinders had been around for a long time; it wasn't such a long chance, having served with Cyril Rollason ten years earlier.

Rollason, a raincoat over his uniform, lit a cigarette. "Mary wasn't that popular, she didn't bow and scrape the way some people like. But she was a bloody good copper. I'll miss her."

Flinders felt a stab of jealousy at the other man's easy use of her name, and told himself not to be daft.

Sergeant Rollason's gaze was steady through the smoke. "What's all this about, son?"

Flinders spoke to his clasped hands. "There was never any monkey business, Mary wasn't the kind. But she's the one I'll measure all the others against, until I'm in my long box. Pick of the litter, was Mary."

"Ah," said Rollason. "Well, amen to that, she *was* a bit special. Even if everybody didn't see it. What do you want to know, Dick?"

"Everything."

Rollason took a measured gulp of whisky and ginger wine, smacked his lips, and nodded again. "Fair enough. You know her old man's a right cupful of cold spit, no use to man nor beast?"

Curling his right hand around a phantom glass, Cyril Rollason agitated it violently. "Too much of that. He'd gone on the spree, Mary went home off late duty, that'd be around half past ten last night. Neighbor saw the lights still on this morning, knocked, peeped in the downstairs window, saw her laid out on the floor, and called us."

"Mockridge said something about spring cleaning."

"Cobblers," Rollason retorted. "Mocky's got a thing about working women coppering out from their rightful destiny of being unpaid bloody servants, that's all." Dick Flinders remembered that Rollason's wife, to her husband's ungrudging pride, was a doctor.

"No, she was tired," the uniformed man said harshly. "Probably steaming mad as well, with her old man off drinking and whoring

as per usual. The light bulb had burnt out, in the front room. A chair was lying on its side—the linoleum floor's pretty slippery.

"Poor Mary got up on a chair, people will do it, to change the bulb, and over she went. If you stop to think how dangerous a house is, you'd take to living in tents."

"He was off drinking and whoring?"

"Yeah," Rollason grimaced. "Mocky Mockridge found our Mr. Taylor at a house three streets away, later this morning. In bed with a bird who'd mislaid her own husband. Her mother says Taylor and the woman rolled in, legless with drink, about half past nine, and never stirred from the bed where Mocky found 'em. Ain't romance wonderful?"

"Just an accident, then," Flinders observed stonily.

"Looks that way. What am I saying? It was."

"Maybe. What was Mary working on?"

Rollason, about to finish his drink, replaced the tumbler with finicky care. "Hold very hard now, son."

Flinders shook his head. "Just for talking's sake, what was she up to in the last couple of weeks?"

Sergeant Rollason started to say something, changed his mind, drummed his fingers on the table. "How would I know? Wooden-tops, the CID calls us, Noddy-cops, figures of fun. They don't confide is what I'm saying."

Then he did have the drink. "All right, I could find out." Eerily, Sergeant Rollason echoed Mary Taylor: "Not a good idea, though. You're way off your patch, in every sense of the word. And Mocky's a stickler for the book, he'll have your courting-tackle for a paperweight if he catches you trying to interfere."

Flinders nodded. "I'll ring you at home, first thing tomorrow. Best time to snoop around a nick, when the shifts have just changed."

Rollason sighed heavily. "Anything else?"

"Of course. Give my best to Helen. And tell me who's the pathologist."

"Professor Craigie, remember him?"

"You're joking. What's more, he'll remember me. I got his car back for him once, on the quiet. It'd been nicked outside the wrong block of flats, if you get my drift."

Liam Craigie, called out from a bridge session at his West End

club, didn't ask what Flinders' interest was. A man with a long memory for favors, he simply passed on information.

"If it's any consolation, Richard, your friend didn't suffer long, if at all. She did not die at once, but she would have been unconscious or feeling no pain, throughout. The crucial event occurred and was over in a split second."

"Good. Least she deserved. And it was an accident?"

Some Scots speak the purest English in the British Isles, as measured as their minds. Professor Craigie sounded old-maidish. "I'm a . . . technician who, by the very nature of my calling, must eschew certainties. Accidental death? Very probably; there's hardly any reason to think otherwise."

Dick Flinders pounced on the qualification. "Where does 'hardly any' come in, prof?"

Craigie, seeing friends arriving, drew the policeman into a corner of the draughtboard-tiled foyer where a telephone box carpentered in the early 1900's cast a pool of gloom for confidential talk.

"There were no injuries inconsistent with a fall—just the one massive injury, in fact. But there was one worrying little abrasion."

The pathologist clenched his right hand and tapped the edge of it with a bony left forefinger. "Just there, below the fourth, smallest finger. A cut inflicted immediately prior to death."

"Defense wound?"

Craigie pursed his lips. "No, no. Just the one minor nick. Some domestic mishap. Rather supporting the presumption of a woman who was tired and careless, accident prone, to use jargon. Except that it was in an odd position: as if she used the side of her hand like a hammer. Not on bone or tissue, and not in a conventional punch, else the knuckles would have been the affected area. D'you follow?"

Dick Flinders tried to visualize that small, cryptic cut. "A karate chop, edge of her hand?"

Professor Craigie was definite. "No, the abrasion's trifling but it extends from the edge of the palm onto the side of the little finger. Ergo, that finger was curled—with the rest, most likely. Extend three fingers stiffly while curling the smallest and you'll understand: it's a strain, not natural."

John Taylor had the indefinably sodden looking, drowned-strawberry nose of the dedicated toper, and spectacularly bloodshot eyes. They squeezed shut and he groaned at the assault of light at seven

thirty A.M. "What's your game?" he croaked belatedly, for Dick Flinders was across the threshold by then.

"Hide and seek. Listen, sunshine, I'm in a hurry and I don't want trouble—neither do you. This won't take long."

Flinders opened the door to the right of the pinched hall. "This where it happened?" It had to be: dark linoleum, straight-backed chairs, a central hanging light with the bulb showing blackened and dead.

"What if it is? You one of them reporters?"

"Maybe." Flinders turned slowly, like a gun turret on a battleship, examining everything. A seldom-used room in a loveless house. Framed photographs over the fireplace—wedding group, an elderly couple outside a farmhouse, a far younger John Taylor smirking and in uniform as a National Service private in the Catering Corps.

Flinders' arm came up in one piece, like a railway signal. A large oval of unfaded wallpaper.

"Who took the picture down?"

"Mirror, not picture, Mr. Know-all," Taylor replied sulkily. "She broke it. She might have been a woman copper, ordering folk around and stirring up trouble, but she was a dead loss around the house.

"Rotten temper, too. Lash out, she would, when she was in the mood. Between being clumsy, and wanton bloody destruction . . ."

Dick Flinders counted back from ten, silently. "She broke it . . . the night it happened?"

Puzzled by the big fellow's interest, Taylor closed his eyes and lounged against the door frame. "Yes, it was all right in the afternoon, I used it to straighten my tie. First thing I spotted; well, the main thing was Mary snuffing it, goes without saying." The grieving widower sniggered and wagged his head.

Flinders went out through a kitchen already smelly, sink piled with dirty crocks, to the back doorstep. The mirror was propped beside the dustbin, its heavy chain starting to rust from drizzle and dew.

Its wooden backing had stopped its breaking outright, but the egg-shaped glass was cracked down the middle. Flinders curled his fingers and swung his hand against the silvery surface, gingerly. He felt the dangerous kiss of the razor edge where one half of the glass was higher at the fracture line.

Mary Taylor had used her hand like a hammer, Professor Craigie believed.

"Seven years bad luck," Taylor jeered from the back doorstep. "Who are you, anyway?"

Flinders brushed past him without answering. Taylor was shouting by the time he was in the hall, but the slammed front door cut it off.

"Two weeks' leave, just like that." Inspector Tuckey wagged his head wonderingly. "And here's me boosting you up all these years as the steadiest bloke between Rosetta Street and the North Pole."

Detective-Sergeant Flinders rubbed his nose. "Male menopause," he suggested helpfully.

"Don't get saucy as well as awkward. All right then, seeing as it's you. And watch your step."

Flinders blinked at him. Either Cyril Rollason had been indiscreet and set the grapevine quivering, or Tuckey, a master of the art, was firing shots at random.

"I always do, Skip. And thanks."

Flinders put the scribbled notes away as Miss Angel came to the public library counter. He'd been studying them all morning.

Roger James Endaby, age 37, general dealer. Suspected receiver of stolen goods. Mary Taylor had been keeping observation on his scrapyard.

Gladys Manley Gray, age 23, prostitute. Had jumped bail at the beginning of the month after being sent for trial, accused of robbing a client. Mary knew her well and had traced her on a previous, similar occasion. She'd been expected to do so again, given time.

George Philip Trench, age 56, suspected of Value-Added Tax evasion on a large scale. Mary Taylor was working, gently and as a long-term project, on persuading his bookkeeper to turn Queen's Evidence and escape punishment as a result.

Detective-Sergeant Mary Taylor had been involved in many other matters, of course. Police work, as the instructors din into recruits and probationers, is teamwork. It had taken Sergeant Rollason more than ten minutes just to dictate the relevant names and add thumbnail dossiers.

But those three, said Rollason—and Flinders agreed—were "the live ones." Endaby, the fence, had a violent record and an understandable aversion, after much experience, to prison. Gladys Gray

was on speed and might have reacted strongly to attempted arrest. Trench was the least likely, on the face of it, but with so much money and ruin involved could not be counted out.

"Hang on," Rollason sighed, his roster completed. "Helen wants a word. Words, more like."

Helen Rollason said in a rush, "I don't care if you do hang up on me, Dickie Flinders! Mary was an exceptional person. Her death didn't have to be, though. You'd better be very sure you *do* have a hunch, not just the instinct to make this thing dramatic because you're emotionally involved.

"I'm not an insensitive fool, I know what I'm saying. Bereavement has messed up the heads of far more stoical and brainy guys than you, luv."

An anxious silence at Helen's end of the line. Then Flinders said: "I wouldn't hang up on you. You're in order, dear, but I know what I'm talking about, too. Not to worry, we'll all meet up and have one of our curry festivals when this thing's sorted."

Walking to the library, Flinders had wondered at himself. He didn't hold with ghosts, ESP, premonitions, and the like. Sentimentality irked him like silver foil on an exposed dental nerve.

Yet the night Mary Taylor died, he had been swept by a sense of desolation and worry that shook him. Depression can be a clinical condition as well as a passing fit of the blues, and Flinders had feared he was experiencing its onset.

The news about Mary had explained that feeling. Somehow, he could discount any idea of the supernatural and still be sure, without the least factual foundation, that she had been killed and he had to do something about it.

Miss Angel's tart speech hauled him back to the present. "Escaping from the rain, or looking for an ethnic minority member to oppress?" She had suspiciously emphatic black hair, snapping blue eyes, and an abiding disapproval of the police, who, she had often explained to Detective-Sergeant Flinders, were minions of the boss class and mercenaries of anti-life, neocolonial interests. Despite this, they were firm friends.

Flinders said humbly, "I need help. There's a poem about a broken mirror, and that's all I know."

Miss Angel scratched her head, like a very poor actress signaling puzzlement to an audience seated perhaps a hundred yards away. "Goodness! *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* is your best bet, fat blue joker, bottom shelf, third stack along, in Reference."

"I don't know the title."

She curled her upper lip. "What a moron. That's the idea of the book, dear boy. The index has key words. Listed alphabetically, that means M-for-mirror will be a long way past A-for-apple."

He was turning away when she made his scalp tingle. "The mirror crack'd from side to side," Miss Angel announced. Startled by his blazing glance, she added lamely, "Well, it's only an Agatha Christie whodunit. I never read them; too class-conscious, and I detest violence."

"That wasn't it. This was a poem."

He found what he wanted in the seventh item on page 354 of the dictionary, one of a score or more devoted to extracts from Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892).

Reading "The Lady of Shalott," Flinders found his eyes blurring and he had to stop, blowing his nose and clearing his throat sternly. Mary Taylor's chanting with its warm Wessex drawl resurfacing as she slipped back towards childhood days in something remembered from them was so clear in his head that the ache of her passing was all the harder to take.

Soon the grief was backed by disappointment. The dictionary gave large sections, but he hunted up a battered, stale-smelling *Complete Works* to read the whole poem and make sure. The lady in her tower, the water meadows, the handsome knight, the shattering of mirror and spell, Sir Lancelot's epitaph while gazing on the stricken maiden . . .

None of it made any sense. Flinders slammed the book shut, making several readers jump at the pistol shot.

To hell with Camelot, he decided savagely. Mary Taylor had died at far-from-idyllic Caldwell Green, and that was where he must search.

Dick Flinders, leaning against a lamppost, told himself that Mary must have stood at this spot, trod this same sidewalk, only a few days ago.

Suddenly he yearned for her to come walking around the corner, head down, cuffs of the shabby blue pants swirling. Just so that he could tell her . . . what? Nothing to do with his feelings, or not directly. Just to be careful.

Detective-Sergeant Taylor had been ambitious, and believed —rightly, as it happened—that a common police trick of borrowing lower colleagues' brainwork and passing it off as your own was

sharpened in her case by sexual discrimination. So she tended to hoard insights and discoveries until an ironclad conclusion could be presented, firmly attributable to herself and delivered in front of several senior figures. Preferably ones who disliked each other and would be ruthless over demolishing a rival's false claims.

Flinders had seen minor instances of her technique during Operation Nail. She hadn't changed, and very likely it had been the death of her.

Shaking off the sterile reverie, Flinders stared across the road. Roger Endaby's yard was rather well camouflaged, shoehorned into an unexpected gap in a row of small, Edwardian-era row houses. The policeman guessed that one of them had been demolished by bombing in the 1940's blitz, and never rebuilt. London is pitted with such tiny and generally squalid sites in places where they shouldn't be.

There was no sign on the blistered door set in an extra-tall, uninformative fence. Walking to the end of the row, turning right and immediately right again, Flinders made his way to the rear of Endaby's secretive little property. Again the fence, with two strands of barbed wire topping it for good measure.

Over the way was a small block of concrete garages in a sawtooth formation offering good cover after dark. Wandering along them, Flinders came across a niche strewn with toffee papers and the trodden-out corpses of Gauloise cigarettes smoked for only the initial inch or so.

Mary had waited and watched from here, and not just the once.

Dick Flinders turned away abruptly, returning to the Consort Street side of Endaby's yard. Peering through the crack between the gate and fence, he saw tea chests apparently full of scraps of copper and lead piping, cartons of empty jars, several old pedal-bikes. A garden shed at the far end must be where Roger Endaby made his deals and kept his accounts, if any.

There was a white car off to one side, only partly visible. Covered in a plastic sheet, but not completely. He could see the number plate of a vehicle registered new, in the past two months, and was able to identify a Mercedes costing enough to pay the yard's annual rent several times over.

"There's a funny motor for a poor but honest rag-and-bone man," Flinders mumbled. He moved to the other side of the solid gate in case the crack was wider at the hinges.

"He's not around."

Flinders looked about, without reward until the voice came again. "The one above sees all." The young man in dark pants and white shirt with rolled sleeves was perched in the bay window of the row house next to Endaby's yard. He had a snub nose, a friendly grin, and was eating toast and butter and honey. Pop music floated out from behind him.

"Rog went off to Derby last night," the youngster explained. "Anyway that's what he told me—so he's probably in Cornwall. He's a terrible old crook, is Rog."

Flinders spread his hands and returned the grin. "That's what I heard. But I need him pretty urgently," he lied.

"Come on up a minute, the door's open, I'm in the top flat." The young man pulled his head inside.

"Quite a place you've got here," said Flinders, having shaken hands with the tenant, Dennis Webb. He wasn't flattering a probable source of information; the flat was surprisingly luxurious compared to the modest exterior of the street. Waxed boards with good rugs, some expensive paintings—expensive looking anyway, though they must be reproductions—and half a wall of stereo equipment.

Dennis Webb made the usual English incoherent noise for acknowledging a compliment. "Well, these places are dirt cheap, no parking space with 'em. Doesn't matter because I'm not here long enough to need a car, and when I do, I can always hire one."

He jerked a thumb at a cluster of dolls on the mantelpiece, mostly in outlandish costumes. "I'm with Allworld Airlines, I bring one of those back for every new country we get to. As for the rest, my family's motto is, 'I can get it for you wholesale . . .' and I hold them to it."

Webb shrugged meaninglessly and bounded out to the kitchen. "Coffee?" he said.

Flinders wondered what had brought on the hospitality. Young Dennis might be gay, of course, but Flinders didn't believe so; even less did he believe in his own power as a charmer.

Returning with two steaming mugs, Dennis Webb explained the trivial riddle. "You mustn't take it seriously, what I was saying about Rog. Just my fun. He's a good bloke." Webb giggled helplessly. "Except, of course, for being a miserable sod with the devil of a temper. So if you're a mate of his, forget anything I blurted out to the contrary."

Drifting to the bay window, Flinders said, "I've never clapped

eyes on him. Matter of fact, he owes me money, through a third party." As he had hoped, there was a much better view of the yard.

"Don't hold your breath waiting for it," Webb advised cheerfully. Slurping coffee, he chattered on. "I'm not a pilot or anything, mind. Except when I'm trying to pull birds. Steward, what the Yanks call a flight attendant. Bit of a come-down, really."

Obviously he was referring to a medley of photographs encased in a transparent plastic block at Flinders' elbow. Also obviously, Dennis Webb was fond of and impressed by Dennis Webb. All the pictures were of him, variously dressed in swimming trunks, football kit, a white pajama-like outfit, track suit, or Air Training Corps uniform, and invariably flourishing a trophy cup or shield.

"Interesting job," Flinders commented abstractedly. He was trying to make out what kind of lock secured Roger Endaby's office-shack.

Young Webb was a shade patronizing. "It's all right until I get rid of the flying and travel bug at Allworld's expense. But the prospects aren't good if you're like me and flunked pilot training."

Neatly he snared the policeman's empty mug—the coffee had been excellent—and took it with the other to the kitchen. "Like I said, I'm only here off and on . . . but d'you want me to give Rog a message if I see him?" he called.

Evidently Dennis Webb's hospitable impulse was withering rapidly, now that he'd offset his blunder in slandering Endaby. Flinders took the hint.

"Ta for the coffee, Dennis. Yes, say Bill Tilden of Dagenham is after him. Tilden Plant Hire, that'll ring a bell." Which was unlikely, since he'd invented name, home town, and business on the spur of the moment.

Dick Flinders woke up in the middle of the night. His temple ached slightly, but he wasn't sure whether that had roused him. Gladys Gray's pimp had taken violent exception to even discreet inquiries about the missing prostitute's location; Flinders had slipped the punch without quite escaping it, and had nearly broken his left hand returning the blow with interest.

He switched on the light, opening the Tennyson anthology he'd found in a secondhand bookshop.

Reading and marveling over "The Lady of Shalott," abruptly he knew that Mary Taylor had been clever and brave and in the oddest way, lucky. Or perhaps providence had decreed that the message

she needed to have matched the words of a poet dead for nearly a century. Brave above all though, he thought, eyelids stinging. For she must have made the connection within moments of death darting at her, lethal hand cocked for that single blow . . .

The odds against anyone's understanding her symbol were enormous, but Mary wouldn't have cared. She had said she would leave a clue and had kept her promise.

There was no hurry now, and his man was out of town, anyway. Flinders spent a scholarly day checking records of births and deaths. He took a long train journey, returning with a revolver and six rounds of ammunition, bought from a man who'd spent years under the illusion that Flinders didn't know about him.

Eventually it was time, and he drove out to Heathrow. The quarry he picked up there took a taxi for the first few miles before alighting, strolling down a side street where parking was not restricted, and getting into a shiny new Mercedes. He drove straight to Roger Endaby's place of business, unlocked the gate, and maneuvered the Merc through.

Flinders, having passed him at Chiswick, sprinted across Consort Street and was inside the yard almost as soon as the driver got out.

Dennis Webb gasped as the muzzle of the .38 found a snug home against his neck. But staring at Flinders, he didn't ask what this was all about.

*She left the web, she left the loom . . .
Out flew the web and floated wide;
The mirror crack'd from side to side:*

All there in the poem, and whether you spelt it with one or two b's, it sounded the same. The Webb whom Mary Taylor had indicted even flew wide, floating in DC-10's round the world.

It was fanciful and outrageous, too great a leap and too fragile a bridge of reasoning—Dick Flinders considered—only if one was willing to believe that Mary Taylor had smashed the mirror for no reason at all.

And there was more, as soon as the poem meshed with his mind. Dennis Webb, so full of himself, yet anxious to play down his possessions. He had no family who got things at wholesale rates; he was an only child and his parents, never well off, were long since dead.

Then there was the flat with no parking space, and the Merc

kept next door. Not Roger Endaby's, for he had been away on business, in his own, far more modest, personal transport. The vehicle registry computer at Swansea in Wales had identified Dennis Webb as the Mercedes' owner.

Webb, so eager to learn more about anyone snooping near the yard next door—and his car—guilt would persuade him. Dennis Webb, the all-around athlete who had won a prize for judo . . .

A fairly low-paid, professional traveler with too high a lifestyle had to have a racket. Smuggling, no doubt. Put the same person near a suddenly-dead detective, and you were looking at a viable suspect.

"How'd she rumble you, Dennis?"

Webb laughed shakily and planted his palms on the side of the car. "She never did. It was me shooting my mouth off, stupid bastard."

He sniffed childishly. "Oh, I can make money but my luck's always been bloody rotten."

Flinders came close to killing him then. The self pity was enraging.

Webb's hands squeaked faintly on the metal. He pulled himself together. "She was hanging around too often. I did this long haul, stopover in Sydney, Australia, and she was still here when I got back.

"So I chatted her, like I did you. We even had a drink at that pub on the corner. She slung me a load of bull about her daughter being pregnant; reckoned she was trying to trace the bloke and he worked round here.

"Well, I followed her, she went to Caldwell Green nick. It was killing me. Anyway, I followed her back home that night, went in. Trying to talk a deal, cut her in if it wasn't too late, if she kept her trap shut."

His expression turned bitter. "She let me hang myself, then she said she'd been after Rog Endaby all the time, but I'd do for a bonus.

"I went for her, she ran, must've been crazy with fear. Broke the mirror on the wall for no reason. I clobbered her, made it look like an accident."

Flinders exhaled slowly. "What've you been running in on those flights of yours?"

"Coke. Not much, not often, but you don't have to and you still make a bomb. None this time—once bitten, twice shy." Webb shiv-

ered again and added, with little hope, "Listen, we could go partners."

"Maybe. Who d'you sell to?"

"Two or three blokes. I told you, I don't bring that much. If you want the main man, there isn't one." Webb's truthfulness was plain. "I just go round the clubs, two or three times a year."

Flinders stepped back a pace. "That's it, then..." The pistol came up. Just as he realized that he wasn't going to squeeze the trigger, Dennis Webb screamed and flung himself sideways and dashed out of the yard.

Brakes yowled in agony, there was a hideous sound of impact and dragging. Dick Flinders put the revolver in his pocket and walked to the gate without showing himself. A truck was slewed across Consort Street at an angle, fender and grille damaged, windshield milky and collapsing onto the hood in countless grains. Dennis Webb's body was in the gutter nearby. He wasn't bleeding much. His head was against the curb at an impossible angle, suggesting that the neck was snapped.

*"God in his mercy lend her grace,
The Lady of Shalott."*

"Was it worth it?" Inspector Tuckey asked sourly when Detective Sergeant Flinders returned to duty, some days later. "The leave, was it all right?"

Flinders was expressionless. "I suppose I've had worse," he said.

TO OUR READERS

We intend to publish selected letters from our readers on subject of mutual interest. This, we hope, will foster good relationship amongst our readers. Readers are welcome to give their suggestions and their assessment of the different issues of the magazine.

All letters should be one side clear typed and addressed to:

The Editor (Letters to the Editor)

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Change

by Stephen Wasylyk

The man sprawled on the motel room bed had one of those softly rounded faces that never seem to age until they collapse one day into pouched eyes and sagging jowls, thin brown hair well on its way to disappearing completely. The trousers of the charcoal pinstripe were thrown on the chair over the neatly draped coat, leaving him in an open-collared white shirt with wine-colored tie pulled loose, white shorts, black silk socks, and black shoes.

The hole in the tie, centered like an obsidian tie tack, didn't match up with the one in the bloodstained shirt.

Not long ago, Hoke Beckett would have stood there burning every detail into his memory banks. Now Nicholson took care of that with his video camera. And better. On tape, the room would remain forever exactly the way it was, every detail fresh whenever he wanted to look at it—in color, from every angle, panoramic and zoomed in and never blurred or distorted by what he might see afterward.

In the new-look Meridian

County, that could be anything—so much of anything that it now took twelve detectives to chase it all down while he sat at a desk behind a door lettered CAPTAIN, shuffling papers like the bureaucrats in the county offices above him and giving advice, neither of which he felt born to do.

He stepped out of the room and unleashed Nicholson with a wave. Where once the forensic genius had done everything himself while happily humming Bach, even he had been forced to acquire assistants.

That Lincolnesque figure hesitated only long enough to glare at two of them as they started to follow. He, like Beckett, would have his five minutes alone with the corpse and remember slower, happier days.

Spicker, saved from being mistaken for a balding, gray-suited, slightly overweight businessman by the gold lieutenant's badge clipped to his breast pocket, held up a blue-bordered plastic I.D. card.

"Nothing in his pockets except this, Hoke."

The man was younger in the

photo. His name was Cyrus Nelson. The company logo was a large *M*, a smaller *T* tucked under the *v* of the *M*.

"Meridian Technology. Three miles down the road," said Spocker. "Can't figure if it was overlooked or left behind so that we could identify him. Not that we needed it. We have his car." He motioned toward a late-model dark blue Olds Cutlass. "Since he worked for MT, he lived around here, so why did he check into a motel room at ten in the morning as Peter Cornwall of New York?"

Punctuated now and then by the deafening roar of a straining semi, the rubbery whir of the cars passing on the highway was unending, high mid-day sun flashing from sloped rear windows as they entered a slight curve beyond the one story motel. It was one of a low budget, no frills chain which had no intention of competing with the towering Holiday Inn next door, catering instead to touring families stretching dollars and a host of sales reps making calls on the high tech firms in the new industrial parks in the area, a place to freshen up when they arrived and make phone calls from at the end of the day, and an opportunity to pad expense accounts.

"Who are you giving this to?"

asked Beckett looking around.

Spocker seemed a little angry. "I'm taking this myself."

Understandable, thought Beckett. No matter how well it was explained away, the story would always leave one thought with a great many hearers: Undressed, wasn't he? Hah. Who do *you* think he was meeting there? His wife? The impression would never be completely eradicated, and to Spocker, destroying a man's reputation was on the same level as killing him.

"People are in and out of this place like K-Mart during a sale," said Spocker, "so I'm leaving Gina Dalmaccio here to make sure we don't miss anyone while she checks out tag numbers—"

Beckett lifted a hand. "Tell me later. Tolley and I have a council budget meeting in half an hour."

At two in the morning, the Municipal Building would have been a leisurely fifteen minutes away. At this hour, only the rotating light on his car roof would get him past the traffic piled up at each intersection in time. One day, he thought, we're going to have a traffic jam that will spawn a hundred thousand T-shirts lettered "I survived the Great Meridian County Gridlock."

Tolley was now called Chief of County Police Services. For a change, he was presenting his case to the county commissioners without raising his voice, getting red in the face, or waving his arms too much. His hair was grayer, his eyebrows shaggier, and he always ended his conversations with Beckett with, "One more year, Hoke, and I'm gone."

The politicians had chortled as they considered the expanded tax base, but they'd ignored the costs—jammed roads and thinned-out services as the lush farm fields became asphalt plots and meadows sprouted condominiums and houses for the people who worked in the buildings on the asphalt plots, all constructed of dark brown brick with tinted windows in a conspiracy of bad taste and speedy construction that extended to the shopping malls. Enormous, undistinguished, windowless piles of brick plopped down in the center of enormous parking areas studed with grass islands where only weeds grew and saplings fell victim to teenage expressionism—yet none of it as bad as the businesses like the motels, restaurants, and car dealerships lining the highways.

Meridian County, once green and peaceful, was now a great deal less green, and peaceful no

longer. Many of the birds were gone, along with the small animals—and a growing number of the large ones called humans who had originally moved here to escape what was now engulfing them. Like Crystal Carpenter, the retired diva, who had watched as bulldozers flattened the hilltop across the small valley.

I'm out of here, Hoke. Damned if I'll spend my declining years looking at the rear of ugly brick buildings, screened by shrubbery or not. I'll know they're there. One last drink together, and come visit me because I'm surely not coming back to visit you.

Tolley had told the council again and again that the police in the small townships and boroughs were overwhelmed, because those birds and trees and wildflowers and small animals didn't commit crimes—if you discounted moles destroying lawns and raccoons having a midnight ball with trash, neither of which were covered by the criminal code—and the county had to face up to its new responsibilities.

The politicians always pointed to last year's statistics and said it really wasn't all that bad now, was it. To be a politician, Beckett thought, you had to be born looking backward.

But the urbanization of Me-

ridian County hadn't driven Beckett to the sixteen hour days and sleeping in the office again. That had taken the departure of Toni Ewing—moving, oddly enough, away from peace and quiet to New York, teaching piano now at Juilliard instead of in her living room in the small house down the road from the diva's estate.

Adding the largest stone of all to the pack on Beckett's back. The one that had his knees quivering.

Tolley was finishing, about to turn it over to Beckett.

He considered beginning his presentation with, "Now listen, you stupid bastards—" but that just might be unwise. As far as he knew, they were all legitimate.

As the courthouse clock solemnly bonged the end of the working day, Spoker slumped in the chair in Beckett's office looking like a glassy-eyed victim of too many Chamber of Commerce committee meetings.

"Nelson was vice-president-comptroller at MT. His wife said he left for work as usual, even though he'd been up half the night. He was in his office when his secretary, Miriam Abernathy, arrived at eight thirty. At nine thirty he left, carrying his briefcase—not an attaché,

one of those big heavy ones. He didn't say where he was going. She reminded him he had a company meeting at eleven."

"So he checked into a motel a half hour later," said Beckett. "Supposedly for a little relief from strain and tension."

"Sure. For that he needed the briefcase. Even if that scenario had been handled better, few people at MT would have bought it. They'd seen how he reacted to the short, tight skirts wagging around the office. Never a flicker of interest. To him, a computer printout was more exciting. When he didn't make the meeting, his secretary's first thought was automobile accident. Dougherty, on the desk, took her call, but he had no way of knowing, of course, that the dead man in the motel was the one she was looking for."

They sat silent for a few minutes.

"Something bothering you?" asked Beckett.

"The wife. Held up only long enough for a few questions. Luckily, I talked to the woman next door first and took her with me. The house is set well back, Hoke, but I could still hear her screaming when I reached the street. Not the first time, I know, but it always leaves you feeling you could have handled it better."

"Anything from Gina?"

"No one noticed anything unusual. I'm not surprised. The men all talk, look, and dress alike, drive the same type car. The women too. Right down to what they wear when they jog before breakfast. To stand out, you'd have to wear a loincloth and have hair to your knees. You know what I mean."

There had always been some sort of mold for people in a given occupation, but during the last few years, whatever little touches of individuality there once were had all but disappeared.

"That tells you something, anyway. No one heard the shot?"

"The slug is from a .32. Nicholson hasn't identified the piece yet. No casing in the room, so the odds say it was a revolver. Wasn't too loud, and if it was fired as a semi went by— The room on one side was empty. The family from Ohio who had the other were out to breakfast."

"So Gina's day produced nothing."

Spicker grinned. "Not exactly. She has so many dinner invitations, she can eat free until Christmas."

Beckett punched the extension number of Nicholson's basement lab.

"Anything?" he asked.

"A hole in the man's tie and shirt, created by the same bul-

let, and powder residue on his coat lapels."

In the background, Beckett could hear an organ playing the inevitable Bach, the deep, vibrant notes probably showering dust from the steam pipes.

"If you don't tell me something I don't already know, I'm coming down there with the largest, most powerful magnet I can find and pass it over all your tapes."

"No point in being nasty, Hoke. Were you aware it is impossible to remove a man's pants without leaving fingerprints on a smooth leather belt? I have what appears to be a partial thumbprint that isn't his. Not enough to go to the files, and useful only for comparison if you find someone. It is also, I suspect, not feminine. Now leave me alone. I have other things to ponder."

Beckett told Spicker about the print.

"I still don't get it," said Spicker. "We'd have to be stupid not to suspect he was fully dressed when he was killed."

"Maybe the killer made it up as he went along, one of these people who believe every man goes through life meeting hookers in motel rooms at all hours of the day and night." Beckett leaned back in his chair. "I'm more concerned with the briefcase. Why wasn't it there? Gen-

erally they hold nothing of value, are too much trouble to get rid of, and are a link to the killing. Something inside he wanted?"

Spicker rose. "I'll talk to Miriam Abernathy again. A good secretary is supposed to know what her boss carries in his briefcase along with his lunch."

Framed by the window, the blue sky called to Beckett, held captive in the office all day. Even a convict gets a turn around the yard.

"Go home to the wife and kids. I'll talk to her. What kind of woman is she?"

"A nice lady. Couldn't figure out why any man would divorce her."

"I'll take your word for it, but since I'll be talking to her in her apartment, Gina's coming, too."

Gina was tall, more skinny than slim, a few strands of gleaming brown hair falling over her forehead, the rest parted and caught in the back with a barrette. In a blue suit and white blouse, all she needed was an attaché case to look like one of the female reps at the motel. Her face was bony, her nose a little too prominent, her soft brown eyes large and wide, her lips full. Contemplating those eyes and lips across a small table could make a man forget what was on his plate,

thought Beckett, which accounted for the dinner invitations.

Beside him in the car she sat silent, evaluating what the newest detective could or could not say to the captain.

"Go ahead," he said. "All I can do is drop your evaluation report one notch."

"Since the department frowns on overtime except in case of disaster, why am I here?"

"You are a female—"

"So I've been led to believe, but I'm surprised, captain. You don't have that kind of reputation."

"Lone male officers interviewing lone female witnesses in their apartments—"

"Ah. Just a shield against false accusations and litigious lawyers. And here I thought it was me. You don't know what that does for my ego."

Beckett grinned. "There is also the matter of vibes. Spicker says she's a nice lady. So, probably, will I. You may think differently."

She considered that as he turned into the apartment complex, waiting until he parked.

"Something tells me you don't need any help at all in reading a woman, captain."

"The gutters of history are filled with the bodies of men who thought they were good at it."

Her voice scaled upward. "*The gutters of history?*"

"Say goodbye to ten points on your evaluation report," he said.

Miriam Abernathy fitted the mold for executive level secretaries—the right height, the right weight, attractive without being too noticeable; late thirties, probably; radiating competence and good taste reflected in the apartment furniture and furnishings. She wore tight jeans and a loose sweatshirt, gold earrings dangling below the short, when-you-look-good-we-look-good blonde hair.

He couldn't define or identify it, but something reminded Beckett of Toni Ewing as he sat across from her, Gina half turned toward her on the sofa.

The coffee in the cup was almost gone when he asked:

"Just exactly what does Meridian Technology do, Mrs. Abernathy?"

"We produce a very specialized component which is assembled into certain Air Force radar equipment by our parent company."

"Any particular reason for the meeting this morning?"

"No. The weekly evaluation of the company's progress."

"Nelson plan to bring up anything special?"

She reached for his cup. "I wouldn't know."

Beckett sensed evasion and took her wrist. The skin was cold.

"I think you do."

She didn't move.

"The man left at nine thirty. He had to be back by eleven. Yet he took his briefcase along."

"He always took his briefcase when he left the office."

"Not always. Only when he needed it. The briefcase held something he intended to show someone at a meeting—a meeting in a motel room to keep it secret from everyone in the company. When Lieutenant Spocker told you he was dead, you knew why, but you never said a word. I think you're protecting someone."

She stared down at the cup.

Gina rose and began pacing up and down behind the sofa.

"I'll give you one candidate. You."

Surprised, the woman turned to look up at her.

"Not easy," said Gina. "You start by pounding a typewriter, and you slip in the specialized college courses at night and learn how to dress, and maybe you catch someone's eye and you start moving up when he does. Along the way, you see and hear a great many things because of his position, but you're expected to keep your mouth shut unless you want to go back to the typewriter, which

is what you're sure will happen if you tell us what it was all about. How many years go down the drain along with the nice salary?"

Her voice was a whisper. "Fifteen."

"You're sweating, lady. Generally when a boss goes, so does his secretary, but you could be hoping that if you demonstrate loyalty above and beyond the call of duty, someone there will make a place for you. You're conning yourself into the sack, honey, even though you know that when this quiets down, you'll be yesterday's romance."

Gina paused.

"No," she said softly. "This is one time you can't be kicked out of bed with a thank-you-ma'am. It has to be more permanent. Good item for the news . . . and today, in a bizarre coincidence, Miriam Abernathy, personal secretary to Cyrus Nelson, the executive at Meridian Technology who was found shot to death in a motel room, died in . . . you fill it in. Car accident, suicide, apartment burglary, mugging. A great many things can happen to a woman living alone. Neither of us can afford to forget that."

The woman's face was as white as the porcelain coffee cup.

Beckett knew he couldn't have talked to her like that. Not in

that tone, not in that mutual viewpoint of the everyday world, two sisters beneath the skin.

He rose. "Now that we know what to look for, Mrs. Abernathy, we really don't need you. I suggest you retain an attorney."

Gina smiled at her. "In case you don't know what he means, I'll explain. I'll be back with a warrant charging you with every damned thing we can think of in connection with Nelson's killing. I'll enjoy that. He probably treated you well, and I can't stand a woman who rolls over in the name of financial security."

She followed Beckett, turning at the door.

"Just hope I get back to you before the guy who killed your boss."

She slammed the door.

Beckett led her a few feet down the corridor. "Take it easy. You're dealing with a frightened woman. Right now you're young enough to stand up and spit in anyone's eye, mine included, without giving it a second thought. Twenty years from now, you may still spit, but you'll think about it first."

She cocked her head at him. "As I said, you really didn't need me along. You had it worked out before we got here."

"Not entirely. If he was killed for what was in the briefcase,

she had to know it, so I wondered who she was protecting. It never occurred to me it could be herself."

"Hurray for me, but it looks as though I screwed the whole thing up."

He shook his head. "You simply hit her with too much too fast."

He led her back to the apartment door. "Let's try again."

She pressed the bell.

Miriam Abernathy opened the door. Her eyes were red, her cheeks wet.

"I was about to call you," she said.

They took her in so she could dictate her statement.

Nelson, she said, had waved a fistful of computer printouts at her and told her he'd come up with something that could send someone to jail. She had no idea what he was talking about and still didn't. She thought he intended to bring it up at the meeting and was surprised when he walked out an hour later. When Spocker told her he'd been shot in the motel room, it never occurred to her he'd been killed for those printouts. After all, the computer could churn those out by the hundreds—until she realized that his set had to show notes he'd made. It finally

dawned on her that to avoid an explosion at the meeting, he'd gone to the motel room to meet whoever he'd said could be going to jail to allow him to defend himself or resign in the true tradition of networking executives. But it was all theory. No proof. And since it implied someone at the company was a killer, in addition to somehow being dishonest—well, that was not only an insult to their exemplary executive staff but would surely bring in the FBI and Air Force investigators, and who knew what they'd come up with?

She'd be rocking the boat. Out. And jobs at her level at her age, particularly for boat rockers, were hard to find.

When she'd finished, Gina looked as though she'd swallowed something distasteful, but they couldn't poke any holes in the story and Beckett asked who had been missing at ten o'clock from the plush, carpeted offices of the executive level.

Andrews, the president. And Gower, the vice-president in charge of production. Both had arrived shortly before eleven.

What she knew wasn't that dangerous, but given the close relationship between a secretary and the man she worked for, the killer could assume otherwise. A uniformed man would remain outside her

apartment all night.

Standing at his window, the office deserted except for Kern, who was catching phone calls, Beckett looked out at the virtually empty streets. The town was no longer the center of activity. That had moved to the malls, where parking was ample and free.

Due largely to Gina, they weren't doing too badly. She and Spocker would pick it up again in the morning. If whoever killed Nelson was sleeping soundly, the chances were it would be the last time.

The briefcase had yet to make an appearance, but all the trash disposal companies were keeping an eye open as they picked up Dumpsters, and during his three hour stint, a popular local talk show host had urged his audience to do the same.

Beckett's mind backslid into areas he'd been trying to avoid—like what he and Toni might be doing if she hadn't left, dredging up memories that would never go away and could only be walked off like one too many shots of scotch. Damned if he'd go that route. He'd been down it after his divorce and before he met Toni and discovered he didn't really like the taste of liquor, no matter how highly extolled as a panacea for anyone in that position.

As he passed through the office, Kern's head with its closely cropped black hair lifted. "Finally through for the day, captain?"

"Going for a walk."

"You'll get mugged."

"I hope so," said Beckett.

Kern stroked a brown jaw and watched him go. Muggers weren't noted for a high level of intelligence, but one who would try to mug Beckett since Toni had left was not only stupid but had run out of luck. Having been there himself, Kern imagined he could feel Beckett's pain, left behind like the wake of a ship.

“Gower was sitting in a dentist's chair,” said Spocker. “Andrews said his wife was away and he'd gotten off to a late start, had some things to do and was concerned only about being in time for the meeting.”

“He's too dumb to be the man we want,” said Gina.

Spocker grinned. “What she means is we checked at his house. His wife is away all right, but Gina had a heart-to-heart with the housekeeper.”

“When his wife is away, he spends the night at his girlfriend's apartment,” she said. “Her name is Keri with an i, and any man spending the night

with her is bound to get a slow start in the morning. Some may be unable to move until noon."

"Very humorous," said Beckett.

"If you were in my shoes, you'd find it discouraging. I don't doubt the dentist, but I could have trouble with someone named Keri with an i, whose real name is probably Delores. Without that—" She lifted her hands.

"Get a list of Nelson's friends in the company from Mrs. Abernathy," said Beckett.

Spocker nodded. "He may have told one of them something."

"Maybe, but that wasn't what I had in mind. We assumed it had to be someone on Nelson's level or above because he met him in that motel room rather than drop a bomb at the meeting. Anyone below him wouldn't have received so much consideration. Unless—"

"It was a friend," said Gina. "I can see that."

When Beckett looked up, they were gone. Four hours' sleep last night. Five the night before. Yet his mind still functioned. He wondered if the police department in a small town somewhere could use a former captain of detectives who didn't need sleep.

Finding him settled back in his chair, eyes closed, not hear-

ing them enter the office, wasn't new to Spocker. Neither were the pouched eyes, stubbled face, open collar, and loose tie. This was classic BBT—Beckett Before Toni. She'd gently eased him back into the human race, but with her gone, he was drifting out of it again.

He rapped on the desk. Beckett's eyes opened.

"Don't say it," he said.

Spocker shrugged. "I save my lectures for my kids. *They* listen. We thought you'd like to know. The friends Abernathy gave us were all at their desks except one, and he went on vacation last week."

Beckett placed his elbows on the table and held his head in his hands. There were times when you knew damned well you were right no matter how many doors closed in your face. Before he'd dozed off, he'd been looking at a rap sheet, a fingerprint card stapled to the corner. It was still there, bracketed by his elbows.

"In order of rank," he said, "you're dumb, Gina; you're dumber, Spocker, and I'm Chief Dummy. We all know the genius has a partial thumbprint and no one works at MT without being fingerprinted—"

He wasn't asleep when Spocker called.

"Nicholson identified the print as belonging to the guy on va-

cation. Name is Millard Humble. He was a purchasing agent."

"Was?"

"We're at his apartment. His vacation became permanent when someone shot him last night with a .32, maybe two or three o'clock according to the M.E., and no, there's no briefcase here."

Spoker slumped in the chair as usual. Gina sat on the windowsill, jacket off, arms folded around her. Beckett reflected that she really wasn't that skinny, after all.

"Too many loose ends," said Spoker. "Nothing hangs together, Hoke, you know?"

There was always a sort of logic. Weird sometimes, but still there. You needed a key to understand it, the way you needed a formula to solve a math problem.

Nelson over Humble multiplied by .32, divided by computer printouts plus the briefcase equals—what? A piece was missing.

"Either of you want to hear something bothering me?" asked Gina.

"Physically, emotionally, or socially?" asked Beckett.

"Mentally. Like Miriam Abernathy. The fountainhead from which all information flows."

She'd never made a secret of not liking Abernathy, but wasn't

that why he'd taken her along?

"All we have is her word for almost everything. What Nelson said. The computer print-outs. The briefcase. What happens if we take all of that away?"

"We don't have a damned thing," said Spoker.

"No, lieutenant. We have an entirely new case. One built around what she told us as a cover for what really happened. I'd like to spend a few hours looking behind the front we've seen."

Spoker, who had spent more time with her than Beckett, gave him an almost imperceptible nod.

"Go," said Beckett.

As his body couldn't be denied sleep indefinitely, neither could it be denied food. He sat in the restaurant across from the courthouse, sipping his second cup of coffee after the flounder fillet. Fish is brain food, they said. Okay. I can no longer walk these streets, drive these roads, sit parked staring at the house where Toni lived. I can no longer stay here or work here. It was as simple as that. Go to work, flounder.

Gina found him there.

"You can tell me to get lost until you're finished, captain—"

"Sit down and have some coffee."

He'd been right. Staring at those eyes and lips across a small table could make a man forget what was on his plate.

"Maybe the lieutenant should hear this. I don't want him to think—"

"If he was your partner, yes. He isn't. He took you along because you're the newest on the squad and the odd man out. He won his spurs a long time ago, so he isn't going to worry about sharing in any glory your freelancing might turn up. What's the story on Abernathy?"

"I read her all wrong. She has about as much reason to worry about financial security as Princess Margaret, and even Meryl Streep would envy that acting she laid on us last night. I stopped when I reached a net worth of three hundred thousand. She didn't inherit it, and she didn't get it from her ex-husband, and anyone who believes she acquired it through frugality and wise investing is an ideal customer for junk bonds. Furthermore, no way she's living a cloistered existence, so I asked who the office gossips had her down for. Try the recently deceased Millard Humble. Very odd she should have a close relationship with the two men we've found dead, so I asked the question no one thought to ask. Where was *she* yesterday morning at ten? No

one seems to know. Then I called Peters, who played sentry outside her apartment last night. Could she have left through the service entrance? His exact words were, hey, I wasn't in bed with her, you know. I didn't tell him how lucky he was."

They come along once in a blue moon, thought Beckett, the ones who hear the little warning bells and keep digging.

"Where is she now?"

"She was at the office all day, working with the man taking over for Nelson. I suppose she's at her apartment now. I think the only reason she's still here is because a sudden departure wouldn't look good." She pushed her coffee cup aside. "Ever since I heard it, I've had a very unladylike word for that story of hers."

"Go ahead. I'm not easily shocked."

A light danced in the brown eyes and her lips twitched.

"Hogwash," she said.

Beckett smiled. "Stake out her apartment, but don't spook her. If she walks out, bring her in, even if she says she's going shopping. With that kind of money, she doesn't have to take anything with her. She can afford to buy everything new."

He called in Spocker and to-

gether they juggled the men around to concentrate on MT and Miriam Abernathy. Three hours later, after much grumbling by Tolley about the overtime, he pulled up behind Gina's car and handed her a warrant.

"We put it together with the cooperation of the people at MT. Spocker will be here shortly with a search warrant, but since you zeroed in on her first, she's all yours. I'll be your backup."

If the lights in the parking area hadn't been on, her grin would have been a good substitute.

They walked toward the door. "Just the two of us?"

"We're not dealing with a crazed mass murderer here, just a greedy woman who set up a fake corporation that was issued checks for supplying nothing at all, and made it work because she was sleeping with the man who issued the purchase orders and was the secretary for the one who issued the checks. We think that Nelson realized what Humble was doing, but had no idea she was in on it, so when she asked him to meet Humble—give the light of her life a break—Mr. Nice Guy Nelson went along. As nearly as we can figure out, there was a period of about forty-five minutes when no one saw her in the offices. She probably went to the motel, even

though no gate guard remembers seeing her leave. They have a bad habit of looking at the bumper parking permit instead of the car and the occupant. She probably wanted to be at the meeting, too. Humble killed Nelson and she very likely slipped out last night and killed Humble so he couldn't blow the whistle on her before she took off with the money. I don't think she'll be any trouble. When you hand her the warrant, she'll probably faint when she thinks of how close she came."

"Not her," she said grimly. "She's never fainted in her life."

Abernathy didn't faint. She didn't even turn white when Gina told her she was under arrest.

Beckett stepped forward with the handcuffs. "You have the right to remain silent—"

She held up a hand. "Don't bother reading me my rights. I have to say this. He could have gone along, just let us resign. We'd have gone away and none of this would have happened. If it had been Andrews or Gower or one of the others, that's what he'd have done. The corporation never prosecutes one of *them*. They're simply let go. Bad publicity, they say. Destroys confidence in the corporation. Pushes down the price of shares. Penalizes the inno-

cent stockholder. In reality, they're simply protecting each other. Never call *them* dishonest or thieves. *They're* guilty of bad judgment. The money wasn't that important. Spread out over five years, it doesn't begin to compare with the big bonuses and stock options they give each other and the golden parachute deals they arrange. I couldn't see why what's all right for them wouldn't be all right for us, but no, he insisted he was going to prosecute."

Gina glanced at Beckett before saying, "Probably all true, but think how much better it would have sounded from the witness stand if you hadn't killed him. A jury of your peers might have even given you a round of applause. To make it worse, you had to kill Humble—"

"An accident," she said. "The gun was supposed to be in the briefcase when he gave it to me. I wanted to keep them both in the trunk of my car because no one would ever look for them there—"

Except Gina, thought Beckett.

"—and when it wasn't, I had to know why. He wanted to get rid of it himself, he said, but a plan is a plan. When I tried to take it from him, it went off."

Flinty and sharp-edged, her voice suddenly turned dull and soft. "Why do you think I'm tell-

ing you all of this? With Millard gone, it no longer matters. I might as well be dead."

Gina glanced at Beckett again.

"You must have known removing his clothes would fool no one," he said. "Why bother?"

"Anything to add to the confusion."

That hadn't been the reason. Let the psychiatrists probe for the real one—something to do with love or hate she didn't even realize herself. Want to make a man look ridiculous? Take away his pants—a situation always good for a laugh.

"You'd have been better off not mentioning the briefcase."

She shrugged. "We all make mistakes. I thought it would add credibility to what I was telling you."

The jacket to the skirt and blouse she was wearing was lying on the seat of a small chair, as though thrown there when she came in.

Beckett motioned toward it and stepped forward, the cuffs dangling from his hand. "Put it on."

He'd known the .32 would turn up in the search of the apartment. He didn't expect it to turn up in her hand as she spun. *Damn!*

He lunged, underhanding the cuffs toward her head, following through with his fist—hit-

ting home just as she fired —scent she was wearing overwhelmed by burned gunpowder —breath gone in a huge gasp, lungs paralyzed as she catapulted back into the wall—legs suddenly rubbery—thinking as he fell that this might be the answer to everything.

He ended on his hands and knees, straddling her. His breath came back. Pain exploded. He grimaced at a white-faced Gina.

“Remember the gutters of history,” he said.

Fully dressed, he stood at the window. The hospital was new, built on a hill overlooking the valley, green lawn sloping toward a stand of trees beyond which five yellow brick condominium towers rose, the complex so huge that it wasn’t unusual for the people who lived there to have a ten minute walk to their cars. Explain the logic of that for fifteen hundred a month, he thought.

Gina appeared at the door, riding herd on the young nurse pushing the inevitable wheelchair.

“Take that thing away,” he said.

The nurse looked at Gina. “The rules—”

“Don’t give me a hard time, captain. I volunteered for this.”

Spocker had told him she’d insisted on it. Even though they’d both been caught flat-footed, someone else might have come to him weepy, apologetic, and with excuses. She hadn’t, but Spocker had also told him he’d torn up three resignations before convincing her he could destroy them faster than she could type them up.

“Didn’t your mother ever tell you never to volunteer for anything? Let’s go.”

“Just follow,” she told the nurse. “We’ll scoop him up when he collapses.”

In the car, she said, “Thought you’d like to know. Abernathy won’t go to trial for quite a while now that the psychiatrists have hold of her.”

It might have been when he opened his eyes in the recovery room, or even the first day he’d sat up, but somewhere in there, he’d realized the pain of Toni’s departure was gone. He couldn’t buy the obvious—Beckett alive—Beckett on the brink—a grateful Beckett alive again with a new perspective. No, thank you. That wasn’t it.

He’d awakened one night in the quiet of the hospital, puzzled by the resurrected memory of a split second of satisfaction when his fist hit home. He lay there pursuing that—he’d never hit a woman in his life—couldn’t imagine doing it—much less

enjoying it, even though he'd had no choice—until it came together in the silence and the dark. Not a resemblance to Toni, but the same scent; perfume or whatever. Not Abernathy putting a bullet into him. Not Abernathy he was hitting.

Toni Ewing.

Change was inevitable. He'd known he'd get over her, as much as one ever did, but Abernathy had accelerated the process the way the high tech firms had accelerated Meridian County's, and if no one minded, he was just selfish enough to be grateful for one and not the other, thank you.

"Strange that I didn't like her from the moment I saw her," Gina said. "I'm not like that."

"Don't be too hard on her. She

did me a favor."

"Oh, fine. Mind if I lodge a complaint here? You'll probably never let me forget it was my fault you were shot, but she puts a hole in you and you become Mr. Forgiveness."

"It wasn't your fault, I forgive you, and shut up."

She glanced at him. "You know, you look much better shaved, without those bags and those bloodshot eyes. The clean shirt doesn't hurt, either."

He smiled. "Buttering up the brass won't help your evaluation report."

She laughed. She had a good, solid, soft laugh. Not giggly or forced or harsh.

"Just remember the reason your men in the gutters of history ended there, Beckett."

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By Night Disguised

Donald Olson

With its chandeliers, blood-red carpeting, and ageless, dignified furnishings, the lobby of the Kerbridge Residential Hotel creates much the same effect as the East Side mortuary where Eric had worked as an attendant before taking the job of night clerk at the Kerbridge; a similar atmosphere as well, an impression of hushed, genteel regard for the amenities of the living as tastefully unobtrusive as those for the dead at the mortuary.

"Mostly old duffers, retired professionals," Eric's predecessor had explained. "You'll rarely see a living soul between midnight and dawn—except Miss Beaujean."

"Miss Beaujean?"

"Miss Leda Beaujean, a lady of the theater who's been 'resting' for years. Or should I say *nesting*?" he'd added with a leer. Like Eric, this young man was also an aspiring actor who, failing to make any headway in New York, had decided to try his luck on the Coast. "You know what I mean, kid. Love-nesting. She has this mysterious gentleman friend who pays her rent and visits her twice a week. Once a week lately, which I think has Miss Leda worried—the reek of *eau de cognac*'s been growing stronger."

From this Eric pictures a gabby showgirl type, all glitz and giggles, and is therefore quite unprepared for the reality when a couple of nights later the elevator doors open and a woman wearing what might easily pass for a garment of the bedchamber glides across the lobby to where Eric leans on the desk studying the script of an off-Broadway play for which he hopes to audition. A cloud of streaky blonde hair frames a squarish face which betrays its age in those areas of the jaw and neck where makeup, liberally applied elsewhere, cannot disguise the process. Yet something of the unsoiled innocence of childhood lingers in the melting softness of her smile as she reaches out and taps Eric's wrist with a playful spanking gesture.

"You're the new young man. And an *actor*, Jimmy told me. Welcome to the Kerbridge, darling. I'm Leda Beaujean, in 351." The



SHE DRIFTS ACROSS THE LOBBY, PEERS THROUGH THE ETCHED-GLASS
DOORS BEYOND WHICH THE SOUNDS OF TRAFFIC ARE ALREADY MUTED.
"DON'T YOU ADORE MANHATTAN WHEN IT SNOWS?"

contralto voice, huskily intimate, breathes the faintest whiff of brandy across the desk. "Please don't tell me the pharmacy hasn't yet delivered an itsy-bitsy package for me."

Eric smiles and reaches under the counter. "It came a few minutes ago."

She takes it with another airy flick of her wrist. "Divine of the drugstore, isn't it, to provide us with these sweet little nuggets of slumber."

Eric politely inquires if she has trouble sleeping, trying to recall if he's ever seen her face before, which isn't likely, as Jimmy had said her career had never progressed beyond the fringes of the legitimate theater.

"Only recently," she murmurs. "Not that I ever *try* to sleep before dawn." Her luminous gray eyes range around the lobby with a cozily approving smile. "That's what I adore about the Kerbridge. I can waltz down and while away the small hours quite as if I'm the lady of the manor and this my drawing room. While the gentlemen enjoy their brandy and cigars. Do you like brandy and cigars, darling?"

"My budget won't let me, I'm afraid."

"My friend likes brandy and cigars." She drifts across the lobby, peers through the etched-glass doors beyond which the sounds of traffic are already muted. "Don't you adore Manhattan when it snows?"

"Snow's no novelty to me. I'm from Minnesota."

She whirls gracefully. "I played summer stock in Minnesota back in the Dark Ages. Be nice to me and I'll do my Blanche Dubois for you one of these nights. Have you done any Williams?"

"Only in class."

Her searching gaze seems to weigh his potential as an actor. "Yes, I see you as Tom in *Menagerie*. Remember? I didn't go to the moon, I went much further, for time is the longest distance between two places.' Give me that line, darling."

Ruefully amused, Eric straightens, clears his throat, and speaks the words.

Miss Beaujean claps her hands. "Yes! Yes! You've got that quality. Oh, how I envy you, darling, just starting out. I'm resting, you know. The parts simply aren't *there* any more. We have no Inge, no Williams. The contemporary theater is all—" she flutters her hands, searching for the word "—all *vibration* now. No *resonance*."

Eric nods agreement, with no idea what she means by this. She

crosses to a velvet-covered sofa between two columns, picks up a copy of the *Times*, gives it a restless glance, flings it down and moves toward the elevator, tossing Eric a smile over her shoulder. "Sweet dreams, darling. I must tell my friend about you when he returns from his trip. Mr. Swann is a V.I.P., you know, and I do not mean *Very Important Person*."

With this enigmatic remark she vanishes behind the sliding doors. An even deeper silence settles upon the deserted lobby, as if the faintest noise from the world outside is muffled by the fat white butterfly flakes of snow that fall soundlessly against the windows.

"They told me to take the streetcar named Desire."

With this or some other line from one of her favorite dramatist's plays Leda would appear after midnight, rescuing Eric from the dragging monotony of seemingly endless nights by doing bits and pieces of scenes from these plays. Leda's southern accent was a shade too ripe, but her performance was flawless, at least to Eric's still untutored ears; he could only assume that her career might have suffered from her limitations, of her being inescapably type-cast in the lost lady roles of those mid-century plays of a certain character which she held in such high esteem. Infatuated as he was by the theater and its glittering promises, Eric could not believe anyone would give it up for love, and he was eager for his first glimpse of the mysterious gentleman friend for whom Leda had exchanged such an exciting life, for what seemed to him a narrow and confined existence. He wondered if she had any social life whatsoever, as she never went out while he was on duty and presumably slept away most of the daylight hours. "Our resident Garbo," Jimmy had called her.

One night, when she seemed in too restless a mood to venture a Blanche or an Alma or a Mrs. Venable and drifted about the lobby in an especially pungent cloud of eau de cognac, Leda suddenly interrupted one of her rambling excursions into the past to cry, "But it's all in my trunk of memories, darling. I say, do let's sneak upstairs and I'll show you. No one will know you're playing hookey from the morgue."

True enough, yet Eric hesitated, not out of any fear of impropriety but from some vague reluctance to share in closer quarters that air of secret desperation Leda's determined gaiety failed to conceal.

"Humor me, darling," she entreated, and he hadn't the heart to refuse.

The decor was not at all what he would associate with a "love nest," unless it was in the boudoir lamps with their twining cupids and frilly pink shades that cast a romantic rosy glow over the cluttered room. The impression was of a permanent disarray, a carefree untidiness, of a tarnished revelry suggesting some ancient party with its debris uncollected. There was a profusion of photographs and theater posters and colored bottles. It reminded Eric of an oversized dressing room in some once opulent theater. Only the rows of books on unpainted shelves seemed out of place: theatrical memoirs, collections of plays, romantic novels.

Leda darted across the room to a big colorfully labeled trunk, motioning Eric to join her on the floor as she began hauling out stacks of playbills, more photographs, scrapbooks, wigs, and odds and ends of costumes.

After everything had been displayed and commented upon, Leda made a sweeping gesture as if the room were as spacious as all Manhattan. "This is my world now, darling. Safer, less hurtful than the world out there."

That she could be satisfied, even happy, in such a world, a world apparently made possible by Mr. Swann, seemed terribly sad to Eric as he rose to leave, eager to escape that claustrophobic atmosphere. "I'd better get back to my post," he said.

"Stay for a brandy," she urged. "It's the very best. Mr. Swann is a connoisseur."

"Another time," he promised, edging toward the door.

A sudden depression seemed to dampen her gaiety. "Do you know that beastly man hasn't sent me a *single* postcard. I sometimes think he must be getting a trifle absentminded. When he comes on Friday I shall be very severe with him."

Friday arrived, but much to Eric's disappointment it did not bring the long-awaited glimpse of Leda's gentleman friend. It was past three in the morning when Leda herself came down to the lobby dressed in white satin and pearls as if on her way to a ball in some far grander hotel, yet she might have been trailing widow's weeds from the dismal air with which she made her unsteady progress across the lobby.

"My friend is late, darling. I don't suppose he left a message . . . "

"No, sorry. Maybe the weather held him up." It still amused Eric

that what Minnesota would consider a moderate snowfall could paralyze New York.

"Darling, he only has to come across town."

"Have you tried to call him?"

"Don't be droll, darling. That's *quite* against the rules. We agreed years ago to play by very strict rules. Well, if you don't have rules it can be risky—for a man in Mr. Swann's position, I mean." Eric caught a strong aroma of brandy as Leda sighed deeply. "I'll tell you a secret, darling, now that we're such friends. I told you Mr. Swann is a V.I.P., remember? That means Very Important *Producer*. Or did you already guess, you're such a smart boy. You'd know him if I told you his real name. Swann is a *nom de theatre*. One of his little amusements. Remember your mythology? How Jupiter visited Leda in the guise of a swan? My friend was an actor once. It amuses him to come to me by night, disguised. I mean, darling, he wears this adorable false beard and mustache and dark glasses and looks like a Russian spy or Mafia don. He said in the beginning it was to protect his public image. Frankly, darling, I think he still misses the greasepaint. Once an actor . . . It was all such fun." Her smile dimmed, another sigh. "It doesn't seem to amuse him the way it once did." She glanced worriedly at the clock over the desk. "Where on earth can he *be*? I don't know what I'd do if he ever—no, I *do* know what I'd do. I've squirreled away more than enough of those little nuggets of slumber to do it with. Don't look at me like that, darling, it'll never happen. He would never be that cruel."

Eric didn't doubt the genuineness of her distress, yet there was something in all this verbal extravagance of despair that left him with the uncomfortable feeling that she might at any moment lapse into her southern accent, betray by some too familiar gesture that she was acting out one of those scenes from a Williams play. Presently, in fact, as if suddenly finding the role too demanding, she flashed Eric a smile of self-reproach. "You're an angel, darling, letting me cry on your shoulder. I'm sure there's some perfectly good reason for his absence. He'll probably send me roses in the morning. He used to send me flowers, now and again. I think I'll go up now. I suddenly feel quite exhausted."

"You'll be all right?" This mood of tragic resignation worried Eric, and what she'd said about the "nuggets of slumber."

A brave smile now, a faint ghost of laughter. "Funny, isn't it?"

When things couldn't possibly be more wrong one is always asked if one is *all right*. Sweet dreams, darling."

The implications of Mr. Swann's behavior proved ominous. Eric found a note from Leda awaiting him when he arrived at the hotel the following night. *E., darling, please knock on my door when you have a minute. Something terrible has happened.*

At the very deadliest hour of the night Eric slipped away from the desk and went up to Room 351, which he found in an even wilder state of disarray. Clothing was draped across the bed and chairs, and Leda, looking more like a harassed charwoman than a faded actress, knelt beside the trunk of memories, its contents strewn across the floor as she packed books into the emptied trunk.

"Bless you for coming, darling. I have an enormous favor to beg of you."

"Leda! What on earth has happened?"

She struggled somewhat tipsily to her feet and wiped the dust from her hands. "The play is over, darling. Curtain's down." She crossed to the dressing table and waved a letter at him. "From *him*. Goodbye and good luck and fond regards. Finished. Ended. Best for both of us, he says." She seemed to have second thoughts about handing him the letter. "No. Don't read it. It's too *craven*. Too *shaming*. He's told his wife everything and she's *forgiven* him. I'm still in a daze. He's coming here tomorrow night, a final visit, the Big Kiss-Off. And to *propose a settlement*. His very words. Can you believe it? Oh, God, I should have seen it coming. After I read it, I couldn't bear to be alone. I made a date for lunch with my old friend Angela Fordyce. I told you about her. We used to be so close in the old days, but you know, I couldn't tell her a thing. I just couldn't. You're the only one who knows. You and his *wife*, may she rot in hell."

Eric made appropriate sympathetic noises which she seemed not to hear, as if by some immense effort of will she had already distanced herself from the catastrophe and was forcing herself to be practical, the abandoned lovebird flying from the nest. Eric asked her where she would go and she said, "I came from the South and to the South I shall return. Anywhere out of this city. That's what I wanted to talk to you about, darling. I'm shipping my books on ahead. I can't live without my books, but I wanted to ask you to store my memories for me. I've talked to the manager, and it'll be

all right, until I send for them. If you'll just carry them down to the basement when I have them packed. Will you do that for me?"

"Yes, of course, anything." But was she sure she was doing the right thing, not acting hastily?

"Darling, what else *can* I do? When the play is ended one makes one's exit, with as much dignity as possible. A *settlement!* I'd rather starve in the street. Nor do I want any consolation prizes. I've packed all the little presents he ever gave me into my overnight bag and I shall insist he take them back."

Shortly after twelve the following night the door from the street opened and a slight figure dressed all in black stood for a moment stamping the snow from his shoes before approaching the desk.

"Good evening," he said in a voice as cold as the air outside. "Will you please ring Miss Beaujean's room and tell her Mr. Swann is here."

Eric regarded the pompous little man with a resentment equally as frigid, wishing he could reach out and rudely strip off that hairy mask of hypocrisy. Swann, or whatever his real name might be, stood very erectly with his head thrown back, the lid of a black fedora almost resting on darkly tinted glasses. As if rooted below the false black underbrush, the stub of a cigar added a sinister, gangster touch to the disguised features. He turned his back and stood tapping a foot impatiently on the carpet as Eric dialed Leda's room, then with a hasty, military step the little V.I.P. marched to the elevator and pressed the button.

The reunion lasted far longer than Eric might have expected; it was past two when Leda called down to the desk. "Mr. Swann will be leaving in five minutes. Will you fetch a cab for him, darling?"

Eric went out into the street, which was a whirling mass of snowflakes and quite deserted. He hugged his arms to his chest and walked to the end of the block before finding a cab and directing it to the Kerbridge.

Presently Mr. Swann emerged from the elevator carrying an overnight bag in one hand, a fresh cigar clamped between his teeth. He did not bestow so much as a glance or word of thanks on Eric as he strode across the lobby to the door.

Eric debated whether to ring Leda's room, or even to pop up and offer a perhaps much needed word of comfort, but the memory of that room and the fear of intruding upon Leda in what would likely be a state of emotional devastation restrained him.

The following night he did go up to remove the cartons of mementorabilia he'd promised to store in the basement. The room looked bare and desolate, as if finally the remnants of that endless party had been swept away. Yet Leda herself appeared far less visibly distraught than Eric had feared as she insisted on their sharing a drink from the last of Mr. Swann's bottles of Napoleon brandy.

"You're really going, then?" he asked.

"Of course, darling. I shall embrace the sun and read my books and dream beside the sea."

"But how will you live? Or did you accept—"

"Don't be crass, darling. And as you may have noticed I made him carry away all his little love tokens. How shall I live? 'As birds do, mother.' Remember your *Macbeth*? I never did much Shakespeare. I rather think I'd make a fairly credible Lady Macbeth, don't you?"

Eric laughed. "Frankly, I can't quite see you in the role."

"Ah, you don't really know me. Any more than Mr. Swann did, the beast."

"You'll write and tell me where you are," he said.

"Oh, darling, first thing. You'll have to know where to send my memories."

Smiling, she raised her glass.

Monday was Eric's night off and on Tuesday two police detectives from the precinct arrived at the hotel to question him. They were investigating the disappearance of Mr. Oscar Browning, a name Eric instantly recognized as that of a fairly prominent Broadway producer.

"The gentleman was last seen getting out of a taxi at Grand Central around two o'clock Monday morning." He exchanged a sly glance with his companion. "Somewhat disguised."

"Then you know—"

"Oh, yes. We talked to Miss Beaujean before she left the hotel. Browning's wife had reported he never arrived at his home in Greenwich. She gave us the name of a lady here at the Kerbridge whom she'd only recently learned her husband had been in the habit of visiting. Miss Beaujean told us all about—er, 'Mr. Swann.' We'd just like you to confirm Miss Beaujean's statement that the gentleman left the hotel at around two in the morning, and that he was alone."

"That's right, I found a cab for him."

"We've talked to the cabby. He said the gentleman was carrying an overnight bag. You saw him arrive that night? Was he carrying any luggage?"

"When he arrived? No. Didn't Miss Beaujean explain—"

"Miss Beaujean's statement was somewhat—ambiguous."

The other detective made a rude noise. "What'd I tell you? The guy disappears. His lady friend leaves town. Add it up, Charlie."

Eric opened his mouth, then shut it, amused that Leda must have given the impression she and "Mr. Swann" were running away together. Or . . . good Lord, could it be true? Could Leda's entire performance as the betrayed lover have been an *act*? Eric felt rather hurt that she might deliberately have hoodwinked him as well.

The story hit the news next morning. POLICE PROBE DISAPPEARANCE OF BROADWAY PRODUCER. Leda's name was not mentioned, yet there was no speculation about possible foul play.

It was a month later when Eric landed a small role in an off-Broadway play. The role of his mother was played by Angela Fordyce. Eric ventured to mention to her one day at rehearsal that he'd known Leda Beaujean and asked if Angela had heard from her..

"Not a word," she said. "But I'm not surprised. Leda and I hadn't been close for years, not since she holed up in the Kerbridge and turned into a recluse. Odd, you know, she invited me to lunch before she left town. I had the feeling she wanted to tell me something but couldn't bring herself to talk about it. Strange woman, Leda. A trifle mad, I always thought. Funny thing, she later called me and asked me to do her a favor. Said she was moving and asked me to hold her books for her. I hadn't the room, actually, but she was so insistent I agreed."

"She's never told you where to send the trunk?"

"No trunk. They were sent over in packing cases."

Eric said nothing but continued to puzzle over this apparently pointless fib Leda had told him. If he'd been entrusted with her "memories" and Angela with her books, what had she shipped away in the trunk? He clearly remembered her packing it with books. It was all very odd.

The enigma nagged at his mind until finally, thinking impossible thoughts, he called Jerry Burrows, his daytime counterpart at the

Kerbridge. Eric asked him if he recalled the day Leda moved out of the hotel. Burrows grinned. "Oh, sure. She gave me a bottle of Napoleon brandy for being 'such an angel.' "

"Recall when you first saw her that day?"

Burrows wrinkled his brow. "Lemme see. Yeah, when she came in about eight that morning."

"She'd gone out early?"

"No. She said she'd spent the night with a friend."

Eric felt a tiny ripple of disquiet as he asked casually, "She wasn't carrying an overnight bag, by any chance?"

"Yeah. Matter of fact, she was. Why?"

"Oh, nothing." A picture was coming into focus. "Mr. Swann" stepping out of a taxi at Grand Central in the wee hours. Disappearing into a restroom. Moments later a woman slips out carrying that same overnight bag. Crazy. Eric laughed at the bizarre workings of his imagination. Even if the idea were not preposterous, how could she have done it? Brandy and "nuggets of slumber"? But how utterly absurd. Leda as a murderer? He tried to shake the idea from his head. But what was it she'd said, with that funny little smile? "I rather think I'd make a fairly credible Lady Macbeth. Don't you, darling?"

This time he laughed out loud, telling himself he'd worked at that mortuary too long. As for the fib about the books, there had to be another explanation.



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